

# The land of variety

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India's diverse economy could be a tale of two different countries

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Writing  
Helen Roberts

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illions of young workers in urban India swipe to enter their plush offices every morning. With international companies choosing India as the base for their



customer service departments, and the country's engineering institutes nurturing some of the finest computer minds in the world, India has become a great place for young people looking to build their careers in the city.


But there is more to India's economy than call centres and computer engineers. "It's part of the



story, but it's not the driving force of India," says Prabhat Patnaik, a retired professor of economics at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, and a political commentator. "The engineering institutes across India have created a lot of skill, but that skill is migrating overseas. The IT skill has migrated to places like the US; it's not helped India so much."

**Above** Pancham Singh, a farmer from New Delhi, is a daily wage earner, meaning some days he'll find work, some days he won't

### **The two faces of India**

Gurgaon, officially named Gurugram, is situated 30km outside New Delhi, India's capital city. It became the hub for customer service offices and brand headquarters in the late 1990s. Since then, it has also become India's leading 



## REAL-LIFE STORIES

### **Arvind Vishvas, 30, from West Bengal, now works as a rickshaw cyclist in Delhi.**

"I'm married with one daughter, but my wife is a housewife," he says. "We came to Delhi in 2011 to find better work. I was a farmer in West Bengal but money was low. I now earn on average 330 rupees per day, 10,500 rupees a month (£118).

"My job is very hard, especially in the summer, in the heat. My money is spent on my family, and I try to save a little in the bank and for life insurance. We used to live in a place with no electricity or water supply but then we moved. We're OK now. We never enjoy eating out in any restaurants; we can never afford it. If our government could help poor people like us by giving some money, it would help us very much, and we'd be very grateful.

"There are so many poor people here and they struggle to live. People who are rich have money, while the poor live from hand to mouth. We are so poor that we can't afford to dream about the future. Or ever going to live overseas."

## MEN STILL DOMINATE THE CORPORATE WORLD IN INDIA

financial and industrial hub, with the third-highest per capita income in the country. Companies, including beverage groups The Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo, and carmaker BMW, have opened up offices there.

But just down the road, in a slum in New Delhi, Pancham Singh, a 47-year-old farmer, sees India in a very different light. He houses his family of nine in a one-room slum to minimise costs, walks everywhere and leaves his home every morning with no sure job to go to. He's a daily wage earner, meaning some days he'll find work, some days he won't. "I don't know what my future holds, but I try to work hard for my family," he says. "I can only do that. I work and hope life gets better."

Patnaik believes it's the small sector that India needs to focus on in order to grow. "The future of India should hold on to anything that is done to encourage the small sector and the employment of Indians. We've had no unemployment data for the last two years and we need to monitor it closely."

Shubhi Agarwal, 29, an entrepreneur and founder of decor business Fabsouk PVT, would like to see India invest in the infrastructure of manufacturing. She believes that if entrepreneurs invest more time and money in India, the economy will eventually benefit.

"If we are to see our country grow, we need better education and more affordable education," she says. "The level of education has been increasing in India, but it is also becoming costly. Good education needs to be accessed by all. If my parents had not got me a good education, I would not have had the confidence to leave my job and start my own business."

Agarwal, from Gurugram, left her sales and marketing job in 2015 to start her own business. But she knew she had the skill to sell anything. "It took courage to leave a secure, well-paid job to go it alone and start from scratch. But I believed in myself and my skills. Even though women in business are still not taken seriously, I have a supportive family and husband who believe in me."

Men still dominate the corporate world in India, and Agarwal says that when she walks into a factory, looking for places to develop her products, the working men will look at her and doubt her capabilities. "Even though I'm a confident woman in my field of work, men still dominate the workplace," she explains, "and it seems they always need time to accept that I will succeed."

Even though Agarwal has not had to overcome personal challenges to succeed in business, she appreciates that generally women have to work a lot harder to balance work with their family responsibilities. "In India, it's expected that women will cook the meals and raise the children. Those traditional values are still there, so if you want a career too, then you have to do it all. I don't



## REAL-LIFE STORIES

**Shubhi Agarwal, 29, is founder of handcrafted decor company Fabsouk and lives in Gurugram, Haryana.**

"I'm married, and both my husband and I work," she says. "Since I was a teenager, I wanted to work for myself. So, after my education, I got a job in sales and marketing and after seven years I finally opened my own business. I can earn up to five lakh rupees a month (£5,600) and I love my work. I learn a lot and I feel very fulfilled.

"I'm a fun-loving person so I like to make time for enjoyment. I make sure I travel somewhere every 45 days. That could be a one-day trip or a ten-day holiday somewhere new. I also like to go out for dinner with friends, or see a movie, and I've recently started writing.

"I believe the key to improving the quality of lives in India is through education – better and affordable education. If you are educated, it can give you so much in life. The population of India can be a good thing. We have the largest consumer base and we should use it positively. We should invest domestically and make our country great."



feel I work any harder than my husband, but generally, I feel women in India work very hard if they want a family and a career."

## LGBT rights

Harish Iyer, 40, an equal rights activist from Mumbai, believes that India is making positive progress but there's still a lot to do, especially when it comes to integrating the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community into the workplace.

"Overall, the last decade has been a positive ride," he says. "The criminalisation of homosexuals in 2013 was devastating. Many liberals in India were heartbroken, but it wasn't all negative because it gave us the chance to unite and mobilise, and not rest on our laurels." After a staunch campaign, the Supreme Court announced in 2018 that as long as consensual sex was between two adults, the law should not get involved.

"Following the 2018 announcement, I've seen a sharp change," says Iyer. "There's still a lot of work to be done, but no company wants to be known as being homophobic nowadays, so leaders are making every effort to tackle any existing issues within their company."

Nevertheless, he highlights that companies can be reticent about publicising their efforts in this area, saying: "While I am often asked to hold motivational talks in many top

corporations, many also ask me not to talk about them on social media."

In May Prime Minister Narendra Modi was re-elected into government with a convincing result in the polls. His success in the world's largest democratic elections is seen as a victory for Hindu nationalism. Patnaik, who believes in a liberal India, argues that the country is entering "difficult waters".

"This government doesn't have an economic agenda," he says. "They'll continue doing what they've been doing, making it easier for corporations to do business here and undertake investments, but there's no strategy. We face economic difficulties. The global recession we face will create acute unemployment here but the government does not have the agenda to deal with it."

He adds: "The future of India lies in the small sector and ensuring that we can employ domestically. One party during the election had a manifesto to give 6,000 rupees a month to 20% of the poorest communities – that's approximately 50 million households. They didn't win and if they had, no one has any idea how they would have financed it, but at least people have started talking about poverty. India has a big issue with it. The fact the subject is now floating around is a good thing, so let's see how this government will tackle it." ■

*Helen Roberts is an international journalist and founder of Cover Asia Press, based in New Delhi and London*

## INDIA IN NUMBERS\*

**3.287**

million km<sup>2</sup> in land area

**\$2.7**

trillion nominal GDP

**1.37**

billion people

**68.56**

years, life expectancy

**22**

major languages spoken

\*Sources: Wikipedia and the World Bank

## THE FUTURE OF INDIA LIES IN THE SMALL SECTOR