



act:onaid

Country and Community information



india

ActionAid in India



India Facts:

- India has a population of 1,014 million.
- The average life expectancy is 63 years.
- 44 per cent of people are illiterate.
- 16 major languages are spoken.

India is one of the most vivid and diverse countries in the world with tropical lowlands, extensive deserts and Himalayan peaks.

The climate is as varied as the geography, with temperatures between 10 and 33 degrees centigrade. Average rainfall ranges from only a few centimetres a year in the western Thar Desert, to a metre in Meghalaya in the east.

India is the world's largest democracy, with a population of over one billion people. More than 16 major languages and over 1,000 dialects are spoken – although the official language is Hindi and English is widely used. The state is officially secular, but just over 80 per cent of Indian people are Hindu, about 11 per cent are Muslim and the rest are Christian, Sikh, Buddhist or Jain.

India combines a sophisticated industrial economy with a high prevalence of subsistence farming. Nearly three quarters of the population live in villages, but increasingly people are seeking to escape rural poverty and migrate to cities in search of work.

The Hindu caste system traditionally determines relationships within a community. Most social contact, including marriage, is governed by these distinctions. Those Hindus who fall outside the caste system make up India's so-called scheduled castes – the 'untouchables'. They literally have no class and are expected to perform society's most menial and degrading tasks. Mahatma Gandhi called them Harijans – the 'Children of God' – but they themselves prefer the term Dalit, meaning 'oppressed' or 'downtrodden'.

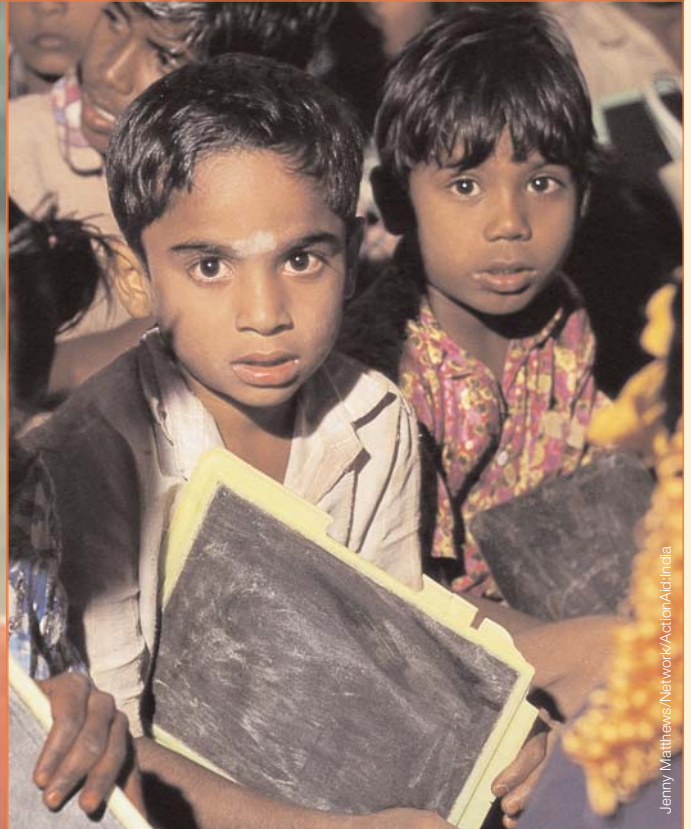
India's tribal people, or adivasis, are also excluded from the caste system. Their livelihood has traditionally depended on the forests, which are fast being reduced by the expansion of agriculture and the heavy demand for timber and firewood.

ActionAid works with the most economically and socially disadvantaged members of Indian society – mainly Dalits, tribal people, women, children, homeless and disabled people.





Jenny Matthews/Network/ActionAid India



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Where we work

ActionAid has been working in India since 1972. It was the first of our programmes and is now the largest. We are now working with over one million people, in partnership with a network of around 300 local voluntary organisations and community groups. Our partner organisations have a wealth of local knowledge and well-established relationships with people in their areas. This is essential to ensure that our work is successful and can be maintained even when ActionAid's assistance comes to an end.

ActionAid India works on over 80 projects, across 14 regions. Our regional offices are located in: Bangalore, Bhopal, Bhubaneswar, Calcutta, Chattisgarh, Chennai, Delhi, Gujarat, Guwahati, Hyderabad, Jaipur, Lucknow, Mumbai and Patna.

Making a difference to the poorest people

The poorest families in India commonly lack access to land, employment opportunities and basic services. Just over 50 per cent of adults are literate. Health services are very limited, with one in nine children dying before they reach their fifth birthday. While there are many common problems facing the poorest people in India, each family, community group or village has their own priorities.

ActionAid works with communities to identify the most important local issues, before planning how to best tackle these problems. Every project we're involved with in India is different. In many cases though, a combination of the following initiatives form the major focus of our work.

Water and sanitation

Many families have no reliable source of clean, safe water close to their homes and must collect supplies every day – sometimes twice a day. The nearest stream, river or pond might be several kilometres away, so walking to the water source and returning with a very heavy container is exhausting work.

Unprotected sources of water are often contaminated and may disappear altogether in the dry season. Drinking unsafe water is one of the biggest causes of common illnesses such as diarrhoea, which can be fatal in young children.

Most villagers rely on local knowledge and traditions. But with no formal health education, understanding of important issues such as hygiene and sanitation is very poor.

In many areas, ActionAid is working to provide basic health education, such as teaching children to wash their hands after using the toilet. At the same time, we are establishing drinking water wells in schools.

Health

Poor health is common among rural families. An inadequate diet leads to malnutrition and people often have no access to safe water or sanitation. Health services are limited in rural India, as it's not easy to provide accessible resources to a population living in scattered villages. Hospitals in larger towns are often difficult for villagers to reach, especially if they are ill.

Developing local health facilities and knowledge is a priority for many poor communities, particularly in the more remote rural villages. The emphasis is on providing inexpensive, cost-effective health care, mainly directed at prevention through immunisation, health education and sanitation. ActionAid provides services such as mobile clinics to provide care for pregnant women, immunisation for children and regular health checks. We train local community health workers and set up local clinics which can treat more serious cases.

3.7 million people in India are estimated to be infected with HIV, so HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programmes are increasingly a priority.

The birth of a child

Among Hindus, birthdays are recorded on Janam Patrikas, a special leaf which describes the date, time and the stars under which a child was born. Children are named at a special ceremony. First names are usually taken from religious texts and the surname is generally the father's. The exception is in the state of Kerala in the south, where the mother's name is taken.

Education

Despite the Indian Government's commitment to providing education for all children up to the age of 14, it will be a long time before this becomes a reality.

Social and economic pressures reduce the likelihood of the poorest children being able to attend school. Rigid social conventions make it difficult for children from a low caste, such as Dalit and tribal communities, to learn alongside children of higher caste groups.

In remote rural areas, educational facilities can be scarce. Many poor children simply do not have the time to attend school, as they are needed to help earn a living for the family.

Making education more accessible is a key priority for ActionAid. We have helped build low cost schools in villages, offering lessons in the evenings or early mornings to fit around children's other duties.

Sending Sharada to school

When Jamkibai was growing up in the village of Nagasanpalli Tanda, she never had the chance to go to school. So when she had children of her own, she was determined they would get an education. With help from ActionAid, the village women's group started a thrift fund. Soon Jamkibai was able to borrow enough money to send her three sons and her daughter to school. Now, she says that the happiest moment in her life was sending her daughter, Sharada, to school.





Jenny Mathews/Network/ActionAid India

Disabilities

ActionAid supports many local organisations that work with disabled people, who are always the most disadvantaged members of poor communities. Activities include education, aimed at integrating disabled children into regular schools, and providing healthcare. Workshops and awareness talks are held to help parents and other people living or working with disabled people to understand and accept their needs.

Sanitation is often a particular problem for disabled people and, in some projects, the construction of toilets in the homes of disabled people is a key part of the programme.

Disabled children and adults are given skills training to help build their confidence and increase their chances of finding work. Earning a living gives them a chance to gain recognition and respect within the community.

Learning to smile

Altaf Patel is five and a half years old and has cerebral palsy. When Altaf visited the ActionAid supported rehabilitation centre in Andhra Pradesh for the first time, he could not stand, recognise colours or shapes, talk or understand speech. He did not even smile. With regular physiotherapy, using parallel bars, speech and art therapy, Altaf can now stand with support. He is slowly learning to speak and is beginning to smile.

Livelihoods

Most of the families we work with rely on the crops they grow as their main source of food and income, but they may not own enough land to make a living. If they don't have enough money to buy fertilisers, extra seeds or to improve irrigation, they have no way of increasing low yields. Erratic rainfall, drought or an incidence of pests can make families who are dependent on subsistence agriculture vulnerable to losing everything.

Families who own no land at all will often work as labourers on wealthy landowners' farms, or earn money through small scale trading or craft making. But there is rarely enough money to help them through difficult times. When extra money is needed (for example, to repair damage to property or to pay for food or health care) people often have no choice but to borrow from village money-lenders at very high rates of interest.

ActionAid and our partners are working with farmers, to help them increase yields from their land. Support ranges from the construction of new irrigation schemes, to advice and training on pest control, fertilising soils and preventing erosion.

In some projects, savings and credit schemes have helped farmers invest in their own small farms. Members of the schemes save a small amount (the equivalent of a few pence) each week and can then take out loans to buy seeds, livestock, fertilisers or tools. Loans and repayments are agreed and administered by the group members themselves, who also benefit from learning new management and book keeping skills.



Advocating Change

ActionAid uses its practical experience to advocate for change, from community to international level, on the policies and practices affecting the lives of poor people. We lobby the media, government and others in positions of influence on issues such as access to food and credit, health and education, people's rights and the impact of economic policies on poor people.

For example, with ActionAid's support, a women's group in Orissa, called Mahila Mandal, has successfully campaigned for a women's minimum wage. They have also succeeded in securing a ban on illegal tree cutting and, in certain villages where alcoholism among men was very high, a ban on liquor consumption.

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, ActionAid is able to do so much to improve the lives of some of the world's poorest families. Since 1972, we've helped millions of people throughout the world, giving them the chance to enjoy a healthier, happier and more dignified future. India is just one of over 30 countries we are working in.

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