

# Generational Differences Between India and the U.S.

by [Tammy Erickson](#)

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I'm often asked if generations share common characteristics around the globe. The answer: to some extent, particularly among younger generations whose members were exposed to many of the same events through cable television and the Internet. But among older generations, the shared elements are much less significant and the national characteristics of the generations become increasingly unique.

By definition, a generation is a group of people who, based on their age, share not only a chronological location in history but also the *experiences that accompany it*. These common experiences, in turn, prompt the formation of shared beliefs and behaviors. Of course, the commonalities are far from the whole story. Even those of you who grew up in the same country also had unique teen experiences, based on your family's socioeconomic background, your parents' philosophies, and a host of other factors. But the prominent events you share – particularly during formative teen years – are what give your generation its defining characteristics.

Let me briefly compare some of the formative experiences – and resulting generational traits – of individuals growing up in the United States and India. I'm hoping you'll join the discussion to share your experiences.

**Traditionalists – Born from 1928 to 1945**

Traditionalists were teens in the 1940's and 1950's. In the United States, these teens experienced a booming post-War economy – rapid growth of suburbs, increased availability of consumer goods, and a boom in white collar jobs. It would be logical for any teen growing up in this atmosphere of budding opportunity to be excited about the possibilities of joining in. Traditionalists in the U.S. tend to be loyal to institutions and accepting of hierarchy and rules. For many, financial success is an important metric of achievement.

In India, the 1940's and 1950's saw the birth of India as an independent nation. Teens would have witnessed Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent, civil disobedient campaign for independence, the end of the British Raj, and Gandhi's assassination. Like the U.S., this was a time of patriotic pride, with the resurgence in Indian traditions and the establishment of a democratic republic with elections. But the living conditions in India at the time were difficult – a poor economy, short life expectancies, low rates of literacy, mass impoverishment, stalled industrial development, and destitute farmers. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1947 (also called the First Kashmir War) marked the beginning of a long border conflict.

For individuals in this generation in India, patriotic pride over newly established independent nation blended with loyalty to family and community. The concept of boundaries was an important element of an individual's mental model – boundaries of new states, local sects/groups, and the individual. Success was defined as obedience to traditional practices, while finding ways to participate in this new India.

### **Boomers – Born from 1946 to 1960/1964**

Teens in the 1960's and 1970's, Boomers in the United States were heavily influenced by the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement, widespread protests, the assassinations of Kennedy, King, and other idealistic leaders, and, toward the end of their teen years, Watergate and Nixon's resignation. Most emerged from this era suspicious of authority and idealistic about their role in the world. In addition, Boomers grew up competing for the limited number of seats available to their rapidly expanded cohort. From this, they

internalized the message that life would be a perpetual game of musical chairs – Boomers are fundamentally competitive because they grew up in a world in which zero sum rules apply.

India, during these same years, shifted to a socialist economic model under Indira Gandhi's leadership: nationalization of industries, public works, social reforms, and public investment in education. Political factions grew and the Indian national Congress split into two: Old and New Congress. India signed a 20-year treaty of friendship with the Soviet Union; its first break from non-alignment. Wars around borders continued: Sino-Indian War, Indo-Pakistani War of 1965 (Second Kashmir War), and the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 (independence of Bangladesh). The rupee was liberalized and underwent severe devaluation. A "Green Revolution" improved agricultural productivity enabling India to feed its population self-sufficiently after two decades of food imports. Toward the end of the period, during the Indian Emergency of 1975-77, Gandhi is accused of corruption, rules by decree, suspends elections and civil liberties, and is removed from power by the opposition.

For teens in India at this time, economic options were limited by the sluggish economy; personal options are heavily influenced by the family, group, or caste into which one was born. For those who are able, success is linked with getting out of India to obtain higher education and work in the U.K. or U.S. Similar to U.S. teens' experience with Watergate, the Indian Emergency left this generation with skepticism of political leaders.

### **Generation X – Born from 1961/1965 to 1979**

Generation X teens in the United States during the 1980's and 1990's lived through a period of extraordinary social change. The economy was poor and many saw important adults in their lives laid off from jobs where they had planned to spend their entire career. They were influenced by the Challenger disaster – the space shuttle that blew up shortly after takeoff, women entering the workforce, rising divorce rates, and the growth of electronic games and of the Internet. The first generation of "latch key kids," X'ers internalized the possibility that many of the institutions in their lives – whether marriage

or corporate employment – could disappear. As a result, it is logical that self-reliance became an important life value – a desire to keep multiple options open if something bad were to happen. X'ers are generally mistrustful of institutions, loyal to their friends, and dedicated to being good parents.

Teens in India saw Indira Gandhi killed by her bodyguards and succeeded by her son Rajiv Gandhi, who instituted a number of important reforms: loosened business regulations, lower restrictions on foreign investment/imports, and reduced bureaucracy. Rajiv also led the country into a major expansion of the telecommunications industry, space program, software industry and information technology sector. Political conflict continued: Rajiv Gandhi's image as honest politician was shattered by the Bofors scandal and he was later killed by suicide bomber. P.V. Narasimha Rao became Prime Minister and initiated further economic liberalization and reform. Still, over 75% of 1980s Indian Institutes of Technology graduates emigrated to the United States.

Members of Gen X in India developed a mental model patterned on a rich, vibrant democracy – comfortable with many views, perspectives, and voices. The constraints of the caste system were giving way to the power of education, which was increasingly available for the best and brightest. Although success continues to be associated with moving outside the country, economic opportunity is growing within India. Diaspora not only take care of and retain close ties with those in India, but are beginning to make investments in the country's economic future.

### **Generation Y – Born from 1980 to 1995**

Globally, Generation Ys' immersion in personal technology enabled this generation to experience many of the same events and, as a result, develop as the most globally similar generation yet. Acts of terrorism and school violence were among this generation's most significant shared formative events. The random nature of terrorism – in which inexplicable things happen unexpectedly to anyone at any time – left many Y's with the view that it is logical to live life fully now. Around the world, this generation has a sense of immediacy that is often misinterpreted by older co-workers as impatience.

In the U.S., Y's teen years were marked by an unprecedented bull market and a strong pro-child culture. As a result, they are optimistic, goal-oriented, and very family-centric.

In India, the late 1990's and 2000's saw the development of a large middle-class and increased demand for and production of many consumer goods – in many ways, a situation reminiscent of the U.S. Traditionalists' experience with a rapidly expanding pie. The Indian economy grew under liberalization and reform policies, the country was stable and prosperous, and political power changed hands without incident. India became a prestigious educational powerhouse and respected source of IT talent. By 2008, 34 Indian companies were listed in Forbes Global 2000 ranking.

Y's in India share the generation's global sense of immediacy, coupled with the excitement of being part of the country's first wave of broad economic opportunity. As a result, young employees in India tend to share the rapid tempo of U.S. Y's ambitions, but with a greater emphasis on financial reward as a desired outcome. They have come of age in an exciting, dynamic country with significant economic opportunity. Most are entrepreneurial and business savvy, as well as technologically capable and connected. Their mental model is heavily influenced by India's rich, complex democracy – they easily accept diversity of opinion – as well as by the Western heritage of laws and customs left from the old days of British rule, making them strongly suited for global interaction.

So, bottom line: some common traits, particularly among Generation Y, and many differences, certainly in older generations. If you find this discussion helpful, I'll share my research on generations in other countries in future posts.

And I'd love to hear from you – particularly if you grew up in India. What events were most memorable and influential during your teen years?

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*Finally, I'm very excited to share with you that Harvard's Corporate Learning group has developed a terrific online program based on my work: "Leading Across the Ages." In this difficult economy, it's a great way to share insights broadly within your organization – to reduce intergenerational tensions, strengthen relationships among your colleagues, and increase productivity and the likelihood of innovation. I hope you'll check it out!*

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Tamara J. Erickson has authored the books *Retire Retirement*, *Plugged In*, and *What's Next, Gen X?* She is the author or co-author of five Harvard Business Review articles and the book *Workforce Crisis*. Erickson was named one of the top 50 global business thinkers for 2011.

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

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Binni sandhu a year ago

Hyh Sir, please update this post and analyze a present differences and progress. And predict some future. We would love listen with many others. Love ya

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