UNIT V

The Subcontinent of India and South Asia (Pakistan and Bangladesh)

The Land

India, the home of one of the world's great civilizations, is the seventh largest country in the world in size and the second largest in population. Because it covers a vast area, and because it is separated from the rest of Asia by mountains, India, together with its neighbors Pakistan and Bangladesh, is often called a subcontinent.

Historic India includes India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The Indian peninsula juts southward from the Asian continent into the Indian Ocean. On the east is the Bay of Bengal; on the west, the Arabian Sea. At the southern tip of the peninsula is the island of Sri Lanka (Ceylon), separated from India by a shallow strait. The subcontinent is bounded on the north by the towering mountains of the Himalayas in the northeast, and the great ranges known as the Karakorum and the Hindu Kush to the northwest. In these mountains are some of the highest peaks in the world. Mount Everest in the Himalayas, at more than 29,000 feet, is the world's highest peak.

The high wall of mountains is very hard to cross. However, there are a few places where long passes cut through these mountains. Here, through the Khyber Pass and other passes
of the Hindu Kush, great migrations (movements) of people, as well as invading armies, pushed down into the lush river valleys of North India.

The Thar Desert lies in the northwestern part of the subcontinent, just south of the Indus River. It is almost impossible to cross this dry wasteland. The Thar has successfully prevented invading armies, customs, and ideas from moving from the northwest into the great interior (inside) of India.

The Rivers of the Subcontinent

What made historic North India so desirable to invaders was its fertile land, watered by two great river systems. The Indus River, which flows down from the northern mountains, is one of the most important in the subcontinent. India takes its name from this great waterway. With its four tributary (branching) rivers, the Indus forms a large fertile plain in Pakistan. This region has long been known as the Punjab, which means “five rivers” in Hindustani.

The second great river, the Ganges, rises in the Himalayas and flows for hundreds of miles across northeastern India. The Ganges plain is the most densely populated part of the entire subcontinent. Many of India’s major cities, including New Delhi, the capital, and Calcutta, the leading seaport, are located there.

Another great river, the Brahmaputra, flows across Bangladesh in the northeastern parts of the Indian subcontinent. This long river has its source in Tibet and empties into the Bay of Bengal. Near its mouth, it joins the Ganges. The large delta area of the two rivers is densely populated.

The Deccan Plateau

The central part of the nation of India is known as the Deccan Plateau. (Deccan means “south.”) In this area, there are many flat-topped hills and high, rolling plains. The plateau is divided by deeply cut river valleys, many of which are very wide. On each side of the Deccan are low mountains called Ghats. (The word Ghats means “steps” or “a steep place.”) These mountains isolated the Deccan from other parts of India for hundreds of years. Today, however, the airplane and railroads connect the Deccan with other parts of India. Many of India’s minerals are mined in the Deccan. The population here is the least dense of any part of India. With the development of irrigation projects, parts of the Deccan have become grain-producing areas.

The Coastal Plain

Between the uplands and the sea is a narrow coastal plain, which borders much of the eastern, or Carnatic, coast and the western, or Malabar, coast. The plain is broken in places by hills that reach all the way to the water. In many places these hills end as cliffs.

The Indian subcontinent has a coastline that is long but unfortunately also very straight. As a result, there are few good harbors. Except for one or two river mouths, there are almost no indentations that can shelter oceangoing ships from a storm.

The coastal plains are very fertile and heavily populated. The rich land has been used for centuries for raising rice. The countries that wished to trade with India set up trading posts on these narrow coastal strips, where many of India’s largest cities are located. Calcutta,
Typical bazaar. Bazaars are important social and business centers in Indian life.

The Ganges Plain is flat and fertile. It is the center of the production of rice, sugarcane, and cotton. Irrigation makes it possible to grow two crops a year.
India's largest city, is the center of trade on the east coast. Bombay is the most important trading center and second largest city on the west coast. Madras, the fourth largest city, has become the most important port of South India. (Delhi, located in the interior, is the third largest city.)

The South

South India is a separate world in the Indian part of the subcontinent; it is a land of mountains, forests, and jungles. Most of the coastal areas have rich farmland. The inland parts of South India have never been good places to live. Consequently, most of the people live on the narrow coastal plains, which have always been very crowded. Because of the crowding and the nearness to the sea, South India's people have often left India for other places in which to trade and to live. Many of the people of South India have settled in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Malaysia, Singapore, the islands of the South Pacific, and East and South Africa.

Climate

A Wide Range of Climates

The Indian subcontinent stretches from the latitude of 8° north to 37° north. Although this is a wide range of latitude, temperature does not vary very much throughout the country. (Why do you think this is so?) In the northern mountains we find snow; 2,000 miles to the south, at the tip of the peninsula, there are palm trees and beaches of golden sand near a tropical rain forest.

Seasons and Monsoons

In most of India, the year may be divided into three different seasons. One is hot, another is cool, and the third is rainy. The cool season, from October to February, is winter, when the winds blow from the north. However, the very cold winds from central Asia do not reach India because they are blocked by the Himalayas. Along the coasts the temperature is higher because those lands are heated by warm ocean currents.

During the hot and dry season, from March through June, the land is brown and dusty, the muddy waters of the Ganges are low, and the irrigation ditches are empty. The temperature in many parts of India often rises above 100°F, making it difficult to work very hard. The upland and coastal areas are slightly cooler.

From July to September is the rainy season. India's rainfall is controlled by the seasonal winds called monsoons. The southwest monsoon, beginning in late June, blows across thousands of miles of ocean, and is soaked with moisture when it reaches India. Rain falls when the monsoon is forced to rise over the Ghats and other highlands. The southwest monsoon brings about 90 percent of all the rain that falls. There is less rain from September until the beginning of January. Then the northeast monsoon takes over and blows from the land toward the sea. Since it can pick up very little moisture, except as it blows over the Bay of Bengal, it brings very little rain.
The Effects of Climate and Topography on Indian History

"To know India and her people one has to know the monsoon." Whenever the monsoons come late or fail to bring enough rain many people suffer. The rivers and wells cannot supply enough water for crops, and the people must go hungry. To the people of India, the monsoons are a source of life.

For centuries, the monsoon winds have played an important role in cultural diffusion. As early as the Roman Empire, traders took advantage of the winds to sail the Indian Ocean between India and the Middle East or Africa. They carried goods, such as glass, swords, and textiles, as well as ideas, from one culture to another. Islam moved by way of the trade routes from the Middle East to India and Southeast Asia. Indian mathematics, literature, and science moved along the same trade routes to the Middle East and Europe. Vasco da Gama, the first European to travel from Europe to India around Africa, took advantage of the summer monsoon in his voyage.

Climate and topography have had a great effect on the course of Indian history. In the south, the tropical and subtropical climate provided ideal conditions for the rice, cotton, sugar, pepper, cinnamon, and other spices that make the south a natural marketplace. But the same climate weakened the people. In the north, the more moderate climate and rich soil made for good crops and a hardy people. As a result, northern ideas spread to the south. Hinduism, the main unifying force of modern India, was brought south by its northern followers.

Monsoon India. Heavy rains and flooding occur during the monsoon season.

The south was rich enough to attract northern invaders, and weak enough to be conquered. The rough terrain could not keep northerners out. However, once they had gained control of the area, northerners found it difficult to hold onto, because they could not supply armies or maintain proper communication with the south. (How did geography affect supply lines and communications?)

Agriculture

Influence of Climate on India’s Agriculture

Most people of India live today as their ancestors lived for hundreds of years, chiefly as farmers. Most of the farmers live on the North India plain and on the coastal lowlands. The crops are largely determined by the climate. The northeastern part of India near
Calcutta, and most of the southwestern coastal region, receive very heavy rainfall. Even during the dry season a great deal of moisture remains in the soil. Some of the lowland areas near the east coast receive less rain, but streams, wells, and man-made ponds provide water for farming. In these well-watered areas, rice is the most important crop. It is grown in flooded fields called paddies.

**AGRICULTURE AND MANUFACTURING IN SOUTH ASIA**

In the warm, wet lowlands that border the western coast, farmers raise coconuts, pepper, ginger, and other tropical crops. Large amounts of jute (a plant that provides fibers for making burlap bags, twine, or cord) are grown in the eastern part of India. Toward the middle of the North India Plain, where there is less moisture, farmers often grow corn or sugarcane.

The western part of the North India Plain receives little rainfall. However, here the great Ganges and other rivers provide water for farming. Thousands of miles of canals have been dug to carry water to the fields. Wheat, barley, flax, sugarcane, and cotton are raised in the irrigated fields.
The hilly plateau region has less rainfall, and irrigation is not possible. Here, wells and ponds are dug, and millet and sorghum, as well as large quantities of peanuts, are grown.

Agricultural Production in India

India is a major producer of a number of farm products, but it also has many people to feed. Therefore, many of the over 850 million people do not have well-balanced diets or as much food as they need.

Nearly three-fourths of the Indian people live by farming. Although about half of India's vast area is suitable for agriculture, most of the farms are small and provide only enough for the farmers' own needs. According to tradition, when a father dies, land owned by his family is divided equally among the sons. Often there are many sons, and the death of their father results in division of the land into farms too small to provide enough food for each son's family.

In the period before the 1980s, Indian farmers produced small amounts of grain per acre. For example, the average yield of rice per acre was one-third that of Japan and less than one-third that of China. This has been due to a number of factors. The first is the poverty and illiteracy of the Indian farmer. Many of the farmers have held on to their traditional ways and have resisted change. Another reason for the low yields is the size of the