



# 印度文化概论

毛世昌 著

兰州大学出版社



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## 《印度文化概论》简介

《印度文化概论》是国内第一部用英语写作,用汉语注释的介绍印度文化的书。它从各个方面详细地介绍了世界文明古国之一印度的光辉灿烂的文化,包括印度的地理和历史,宗教与崇拜,印度哲学,种姓制度和社会阶层,婚姻、嫁妆和寡妇制度,对神、圣人和圣物的崇拜,印度艺术,印度语言和文学,以及节日和庙会等。其英语语言平直易读,汉语注释详尽。

本书可以作为英语、汉语、历史、艺术、宗教、民俗等专业的研究生、本科生了解印度文化的通识课教材,也可以供有一定英语水平的一般印度文化爱好者阅读。另外文中的汉语注释也可以作为了解印度文化的小词典,供一般的读者直接阅读。

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# Chapter 1

## The Environment and History

### 1.1 The Environment

Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people,  
 Thou Dispenser of India's destiny.  
 Thy name rouses the hearts,  
 Of the Punjab... Gujrat, and Maratha,  
 Of Dravid, Orissa, and Bengal.  
 It echoes in the hills of the Vindhya and Himalayas,  
 Mingles in the music of Jumna and Ganges,  
 And is chanted by the waves of the Indian Sea.<sup>1</sup>

—from Rabindranath Tagore's *Jana Gana Mana*,  
*The Mind of the Multitude of the People*,  
 India's National Anthem



001

India is the world's most ancient civilization, yet one of its youngest nations. Much of the paradox found everywhere in India is a product of her inextricable antiquity and youth. Stability and dynamism, wisdom and folly, abstention and greed, patience and passion compete without end within the universe that is India. Everything is there, usually in magnified form. No extreme of lavish wealth or wretched poverty, no joy or misery, no beauty or horror is too wonderful, or too dreadful, for India. Nor is the passage to India ever an easy one for Western minds. Superficial similarities of languages and outward appearances only compound confusion. For nothing is obviously true in India as a whole. Every generalization that follows could be disproved with evidence to the contrary from India itself. Nor is anything Indian as ever simple as it seems. Each reality is but a facet of India's infinity of experience, a thread drawn from the seamless sari<sup>2</sup> of her history, a glimpse behind the many veils of her maya<sup>3</sup>- world of illusion.

Persians first used “India” for the land that was East of their ancient empire, through which a mighty “River” – the Indus flowed. The country beyond that River Indus came to be known as “India”; the people who lived there were Indians. In their own earliest works, however, Indians referred to their land as *Bharata*<sup>4</sup>, which may have been the name of their greatest ancient warrior or tribal chief. India’s longer Epic is called *Mahabharata*<sup>5</sup>, “Great Bharata”, and is the story of warring tribal cousins, whose struggle for power on the plains of Delhi probably occurred around 1000 BC. Modern India’s Republic officially adopted *Bharat* as its alternate name, when the Constitution of India was enacted on January 26, 1950.

In many ways India is more truly a state of mind than a national body, even as India Civilization has endured for more than 4,000 years as an empire of ideas rather than territorial boundaries. Often nebulous and self-defeating, conflicted and fragmented, the rambling bullock-cart continent called India is at once the oldest and most sorrowful as well as the happiest and most beautiful civilization on earth. Her very weakness at times has been her greatest strength, since for sheer endurance India is unique. Bowing low before the onslaught of armies and elements, India has survived every invasion, every natural disaster, every mortal disease and epidemic, the double helix of her genetic code transmitting its unmistakable imprint down four millennia to a billion modern bearers. Indians have demonstrated greater cultural stamina than any other people on earth, with the possible exception of the Chinese. Old as she is, India continues to grow and flourish, transmuting her ancient forms into innovative modernity, adapting her past to suit the present, overcoming Death itself by creating such ingenious concepts as reincarnation, yet welcoming individual extinction as the ultimate goal of salvation through “Release” – *Moksha*<sup>6</sup>.

India Civilization has enriched every art and science known to us. Thanks to India, we can reckon from zero to ten with misnamed “Arabic” numerals and use a decimal system without which our modern computer age would hardly be possible. Ancient Indians were the first humans to spin and weave cotton into cloth that continues to provide our most comfortable summer attire. Indians taught us to domesticate and eat chicken, to play chess, to gamble with dice, to love mangoes and elephants, to stand on our heads for good health, to believe in the coexistence of contradiction, and to appreciate the beauty and universal possibility of nonviolence. India is the birthplace of Buddhism as well as Hinduism<sup>7</sup>, motherland of Sikhs<sup>8</sup> and Jains<sup>9</sup>, the abode of more rishis<sup>10</sup>, sadhus<sup>11</sup>, mahatmas<sup>12</sup>, and maharishis<sup>13</sup> and their many cults is than any other place on earth. India is a learning laboratory for linguists, a museum for ethnographers and anthropologists, a treasure trove for archaeologists, a nightmare for epidemiologists. The average Indian bazaar is more crowded and colorful than the most museums the world over. A modern Indian city street is filled with more



vitality, color, sound, and smells than any other theater or carnival on earth. India pulsates, vibrates, scintillates with such a plethora of human, animals, plants, insects, and divine life that no camera or recording device, no canvas, pen, or cassette can fully capture the rich design of daily, “ordinary” existence. Each of her hundreds of thousands of urban and millions of daily village dramas is enacted free of charge before audiences that never pause to note the beauty or poignant tragedy unfolding itself on countless stages under India’s tear-filled sky.

Indians are among the world’s most sensual yet most austere people. Sex is worshiped as religious ritual in this land that invented monasticism. Copulation in every imaginable form has been carved into stone, immortalized on countless facades and inside the sacred “womb house” of Hindu temples for almost 2,000 years. Yet to celebrate sadhu such erotic art is viewed only as a test of their unwavering powers of yogi concentration. Shiva<sup>14</sup>, India’s oldest divinity, is still worshiped mostly in phallic form, symbol of his mighty erect lingam<sup>15</sup>, with which he “seduced” the wives of many thousands of Brahman sages in the Epic Pine Forest. The same Shiva is also “Great God” of yogic abstinence, whose powers of concentration were such that he could sit without moving for thousands of years on the skin of the tiger he stripped with a flick of his smallest fingernail. Another most popular Hindu deity, Krishna<sup>16</sup>, might indeed be called the Father of his country, since he supposedly married no fewer than 16,000 adoring milkmaids, who bore, mythology has it, 160,000 of his divine children! The Mother Goddess is worshiped throughout India by many names, in both benevolent and malevolent forms, but her most popular symbol remains a smooth round perforated stone, called *yoni*<sup>17</sup>. The Mother is India’s soil incarnate, consort of every male divinity, whose powers are inert without the stimulus of her inspiring, beautiful body. That divine “Power” called *Shakti*<sup>18</sup>, is a unique attribute of the female, whose sexual inspiration and creative energy is prerequisite to life. Without her Mother Goddesses, India would never come alive, but thanks to their fecundity her soil teems with children, taught early in life to worship the Mother and divine sexual fire.

Nature is always nearby in India. Sacred cows and lumbering water buffalo often reside in the most spacious front rooms of town houses, and seem to know quite well precisely where to turn off the street and clamber up a few stairs to the parlor room they call home. Birds and lizards of many varieties make their nests in the beams or rafters and on the walls or ceilings of urban dwellings, cheering their human neighbors with morning and evening raga<sup>19</sup> - chirps, or performing the vital service of keeping houses they inhabit free of dangerous stinging insects. Households blessed with a cobra family in residence rarely complain, since those regal hooded snakes are considered good luck for childbearing women, and rarely attack humans unless startled or





threatened. Every Indian child learns early in life never to reach under a tablecloth or into any dark closet, or as a rule anywhere in the house that might have insufficient light to reveal the coiled body of a sleeping cobra. Night guards, who patrol every Indian town, always pound the pavement with their stout lathis and usually shout or sing as well to warn snakes of every variety of their approach, doubtless warning thieves and other criminals in the process while keeping innocents trying to fall asleep wide awake!

Forest-dwelling *yogis* learned long before the first Indian cities were built that their surest defense against being poisoned or devoured by most crawling, flying, or prowling jungle creatures was to sit so perfectly still that they appeared to be the natural flora, or an outcrop of stone. Some of India's loveliest ancient seals, stone and bronze statues depict snakes or leaf-covered vines wrapped around human arms, legs, or torsos in what must have been quite a familiar sight for many millennia. Not that such equipoise was ever easy to attain. Nor has the danger of poisonous snakes been eradicated. Quite the contrary, as population pressures continue to encroach upon dwindling jungle or hitherto untilled land, India's reptiles appear to be retaliating. Annual estimates of deaths from snake bite are well over 100,000, much lower than the toll from India's most modern predators, the automobiles, buses, trucks, and train, whose lethal powers have now escalated to the point where India can claim the sorry distinction of being one of the world's most hazardous nations to drive or ride.



Most Indians, however, continue to walk from their village huts to fields they till nearby, and if ever they ride, it is usually on a wooden bullock or buffalo cart, whose prototype was built in the third millennium BC. Such carts are almost as common in big cities as in villages, but the modern urban incarnation generally wears pneumatic rubber tires on its bulky wheels, much to the relief of those who ride. India now produces millions of its own bicycles, the most efficient inexpensive mode of urban middle-class and student transport, and a growing number of motor-scooters, motor-bikes, and automobiles, built in collaboration with Ford, and several British, Italian, Japanese, and Czech multinationals. Three-quarters of the more than half million Indian villages, the most remote of which are still without permanent land linked to neighboring towns or cities, are currently receiving satellite-transmitted broadcasts from New Delhi, thanks to USA space technology and cooperation. The most advanced tools of scientific technology are thus turning India's most remote primal cells of diverse village traditions into the mainstream of national goals and aspirations, accelerating the process of modernized change and integration by generations overnight. Even India's villagers are now brought to American homes by TV news reports, although usually only when dread disaster has struck, or to Washington and New York. Thanks to the

genius and beauty of a Festival of India or new production of the *Mahabharata*, the modern world daily intrudes its seductive images of affluence and power into village air, jolting Indian minds from their bullock-cart ruts of antiquity onto swifter, more dangerous highways.

### 1.1.1 Rivers

India and the Rivers mirror each other, bubbling with life, always changing, never the same. Much like India, Rivers are impossible to grasp in their entirety, most elusive when they appear simplest, deceptively deep even when their surface shine clear. Refreshing cradle of life, Rivers nonetheless often prove dangerous, especially to strangers. Like India, Rivers are beautiful but polluted, timelessly enduring yet transient.

India's most fertile Northern plains, still the major centers of South Asia's population, are all gifts of great rivers. The Indus, since mid-August 1947 the main artery of Pakistan, is westernmost of the great Northern river systems, and was the cradle of Indic Civilization. Born in mountain abodes of eternal snow and ice, the Indus, like her sister-rivers to the east, flows abundantly all year long. Indus water, which is rich in mineral sediment annually journeys some 2,000 miles from Tibet of China to the Arabian Sea, bearing enough fresh water to cover the State of California a foot deep. Small wonder the Greco-Persians called the Indus a "Lion". For thousands of years, tierce Indus floods roared down Himalayan valleys to bury the hapless inhabitants of towns and villages erected too close to its banks. Stronger, more devastating at flood tide than the Nile, the raging Indus remained a terror to its valley folk until relatively recent barrages of concrete and vast storage-tank lakes conspired to tame and divert its floodwaters. Following the Partition of British India in 1947, India and neighboring Pakistan argued bitterly over what each nation considered its fair share of precious Indus Valley canal waters, without which fecund soil on both sides of the new border would soon turn into desert wasteland. International mediation resolved that vital conflict in 1960, yet each nation periodically accuses the other of siphoning off more water than it's meriting according to solemn treaty.

"Five Rivers" – Persian *Punjab* – flow like fingers of a giant open hand into the Indus, merging with the artery as it races toward the sea. The land of those five great rivers is still called "Punjab" in both Pakistan and India, although since the fateful 1947 Partition only four of the original five flow through the former state, while a mere two fructify the latter. India's Punjab was further divided in 1966, losing its lower eastern half to the Hindu-majority State of Haryana, following years of bitter conflict with



Punjabi-majority Sikhs. Despite its much-diminished size, however, thanks in good measure to its fertile soil and abundant resources of hydroelectric power, India's Punjab emerged in the 1970s as the wealthiest of India's twenty-five States. The hard-working Sikh majority of that most industrially advanced and agriculturally rich Punjab resented sharing their abundance with India's much poorer population elsewhere throughout the republic, insisting on greater autonomy, including control over the lion's share of their state finances. New Delhi's refusal to grant such demands only added fuel to Punjabi Sikh agitation for still greater independence. A small group of Sikh extremists called for total national separation from the Indian Union, urging creation of a Sikh "Land of the Pure" – *Khalistan*. Pakistan, also meaning "Land of the Pure", had, after all, been created as a national homeland for most of South Asia's Muslim minority in 1947, so why not grant a similar nation-state to India's Sikhs? India's central government refused to entertain the demand, arguing that with barely 2 percent of the total Indian population, only half of whom lived in Punjab, the Sikhs could never support an independent nation.



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"Mother" Ganga (Ganges) is India's most sacred river. Ganga is worshiped as a Goddess, and Hindu temples line her northern left bank as she emerges bubbly white and icy cold from the solid rock of Himalayan Rishikesh<sup>20</sup> racing down past sacred Hardwar<sup>21</sup>, goal of countless Brahman pilgrims, to expand in girth and drop her sediment as she slows to a more matronly pace en route toward Kanpur<sup>22</sup> and Allahabad<sup>23</sup>, home of the Nehrus, independent India's "First Family". At Allahabad the Ganga merges with her sister goddess Yamuna (Jumna), who joins her after sluggishly meandering past Old Delhi's Red Fort (Lal Qila<sup>24</sup>) and Agra<sup>25</sup>, reflecting the ivory minaret profile of the Taj Mahal<sup>26</sup> beneath her swarthy rippling veil. At thrice holy Allahabad, a third goddess river, Saraswati<sup>27</sup>, invisibly merges with sisters Ganga and Yamuna, all wending their watery way to Varanasi<sup>28</sup>(Benares), holiest of holy cities of Hindu India. Believed by some to be the "oldest" city on earth, Varanasi is more certainly the most sacred place for any devout Hindu to die. Varanasi's crowded temples raise their ornate spires of stone like worshiping joined hands and arms stretched in supplication toward the sky as their well-worn "steps" (ghats<sup>29</sup>) descend below the greenish-brown slime of the river, which has absorbed more ashes of Hindu bodies than any other stretch of water on earth. The pungent smell of sandalwood, compounded with that of charred flesh and marigolds, wafts over Varanasi waters, borne on winds vibrant with mantra<sup>30</sup>-prayers, punctuated by the tinkling of Brahman bells and muffled whimpers from scavenger dogs that hover around smouldering pyres, while carrion hawks and kites circle slowly overhead. Ganga water at Varanasi is said to have "magic powers", and ailing Hindus from every corner of the subcontinent



journey to those bustling ghats for an immersion believed by many sufficient as a cure for any ailment. Devout Hindus not only wash themselves in the bubbling green of Varanasi water but also drink it, and carry bottles and brass lotas<sup>31</sup> of the precious fluid home with them for future use, or to share with relatives too weak to make the pilgrimage themselves. Visitors are advised to exercise greater caution, however, at Varanasi than almost anywhere else in India. Its reputed healing powers have attracted so many lepers and others afflicted with disease that outbreaks of bubonic plague have been reported there in recent years.

Many other mighty rivers drain the Himalayan foothills to join Mother Ganga's stately, ever - widening flow toward the east. The greatest of those life - generating arteries are the rivers Ghogra<sup>32</sup> and Gandak<sup>33</sup>, of Epic fame, which merge with Ganga herself near the ancient Mauryan<sup>34</sup> capital of Patna. Here, too, River Son<sup>35</sup> moves up to join Ganga from the south, draining rugged highlands of Bihar<sup>36</sup> and Chota Nagpur<sup>37</sup>, whose dark mountains hold the richest stores of Indian iron and coal. East of Patna, Mother Ganga flows another 300 miles to Bengal, where she blends her deep waters with the powerful flow of divine Brahma's "son" - Brahmaputra<sup>38</sup>. This great young riverine hero rises in Tibet close to the source of Indus, racing almost a thousand miles east before veering south and slashing his foamy way through glacial ice east of Lhasa, through troubled Assam<sup>39</sup> and Meghalaya<sup>40</sup> ("Abode of Clouds"), bordering crowded Bangladesh ("Nation of Bengal"), where it finally joins the mainstream of Ganga's flow, pouring through 10,000 rivulet mouths into the Bay of Bengal.

The Islamic Republic of Bangladesh, born in 1971, constituted the eastern half of British Indian Bengal until it became East Pakistan in 1947, following Partition. Although only the size of New York State, Bangladesh, with a population of over two million, is one of the most crowded and impoverished nations of the world. Millions of desperate Bangladeshi Muslims have fled across India's borders to cultivate some land for themselves in the virtually unpopulated rugged jungles of Meghalaya, Assam, and their neighboring eastern states of Mizoram<sup>41</sup>, Manipur<sup>42</sup>, and Nagaland<sup>43</sup>. The indigenous tribal people of these states bordering Bangladesh fiercely resent what in several states has become a massive Muslim "invasion" of their lands. Joining forces to organize a "Seven (States) United Liberation Army", these northeastern Indian Mizo, Manipur, Naga, and Assamese tribals recently launched a violent movement to try to terrify Bangladeshi immigrants into returning to their Muslim homeland.

Unlike the great Northern rivers, none of those that cross Central and Southern India are perennially fed by snow or ice. All depend entirely on scant springs and the bounty of Monsoon rains, which fall for one - third of the year at most. The South is, therefore, generally drier and less populous than the Northern riverine plains. Unlike



China's great canals that link its northern and southern rivers, India has as yet never attempted to tap its perennial waterways for southern fructification. Much of central India's desert wasteland might then be brought to life, and the mostly barren Southern states of Maharashtra<sup>44</sup> and Andhra<sup>45</sup> could also be remarkably enriched. Not that so monumental an engineering project could be easily accomplished, although like China, India has sufficient cheap and; for much of each year; mostly idle peasant labor, to make what would otherwise be an impossible task, a potential reality.

Three major rivers drain central India, flowing from east to west, the Mahi<sup>46</sup>, the Narmada<sup>47</sup>, and the Tapti<sup>48</sup>, all emptying into the Gulf of Cambay<sup>49</sup>. Surat, the port city north of Bombay at the mouth of the Tapti, was where British merchants first established themselves in modest trade with Agra's Great Mughals<sup>50</sup> early in the seventeenth century. Bombay<sup>51</sup> was no more than a series of tiny villages at the time, as were Calcutta<sup>52</sup> and Madras<sup>53</sup>. None of those great port cities, India's major bustling metropolises of the last century, existed prior to the advent of British rule. The western Ghats ("Steps") form a mountainous spine down peninsular India south of Bombay, leaving but a narrow and very well-watered rich littoral shelf, whose lower half is the spicy Malabar Coast<sup>54</sup> facing the Arabian Sea. All the rest of Southern India's great river systems flow from west to east. The Mahanadi<sup>55</sup>, literally the "Great River," is the vital artery of Orissa<sup>56</sup>, even as its longer southern neighbor, the Godavari<sup>57</sup>, is for Andhra. Mightiest of all the great southern rivers is the Tungabhadra-Krishna<sup>58</sup>, which rises in the mountains of Mysore and meanders more than 1,000 miles across the heart of India's Southern Peninsula before pouring itself into the Bay of Bengal north of Madras. Farther south still, below the former Indo-French capital of Pondicherry<sup>59</sup>, is the long but lazy River Kaveri<sup>60</sup>.

From the dawn of Civilization, Indians have settled along their riverbanks, using the rich flow of such water not simply to sustain life but also to assure ample surplus for all those artisans, craftsmen, bureaucrats, and armies removed from direct dependence on the soil, thanks to the River's bounty. Fresh water and fertile sediment conspired to nurture ever-growing populations, North and South, but wherever her great rivers flowed, wide and deep islands of local culture emerged and consolidated. Variations of language and social custom evolved over millennia and centuries around those riverine nuclei of civilized life. Long before the dawn of the Christian era, most Indians of the North spoke one or another dialect or popular language of the Indo-Aryan<sup>61</sup> branch of the great Indo-European language family, whose classical language is Sanskrit, and whose most popular regional form is the central Gangetic plain's Hindi<sup>62</sup>, modern India's national language. By the Christian era, however, throughout the southern third of India's subcontinent, south of the River Godavari, at least, India's



populace spoke one of four major variants of the Dravidian<sup>63</sup> language family, quite distinct from Indo-Aryan, and virtually unique to South India as well as northern Sri Lanka, the neighboring southern island formerly called “Ceylon”.

Tamil<sup>64</sup>, the classical Dravidian language, is still the mother-tongue for more than 50 million South Indians in the state recently renamed Tamil Nadu<sup>65</sup> (“Land of the Tamils”), which in British Indian times had been Madras. Deep roots of cultural identity, fostered by a rich body of ancient Tamil literature, including Epic poetry, devotional songs, and religious philosophy, have given birth to periodic passionate political outcries for separate “Dravidistan nationhood” since before the dawn of Indian Independence in 1947. Redrawing of India’s provincial boundaries a decade later, however, was designed from New Delhi primarily to placate Dravidian demands, carving out Tamil Nadu for the Tamils, the State of Andhra for Telugu<sup>66</sup>-speakers, Karnataka<sup>67</sup> (former Mysore) for the Kanarese<sup>68</sup>, and a Malabar State<sup>69</sup> called Kerala<sup>70</sup> for Dravidians who speak primarily Malayalam<sup>71</sup>. Passionate anti-Hindi sentiment in the South led for several decades to annual burnings of India’s flag and Constitution, but “Dravidistan” extremist agitation tapered off during Mrs. Gandhi’s last years in power, owing to her generous economic policy toward the South, and in some measure because of the shifting focus of Tamil extremism to Sri Lanka. The northern third of that island nation, where Hindu Tamils predominate over the otherwise majority of Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese<sup>72</sup> Buddhists, received much more than mere moral support from Tamil Nadu neighbors, many of whom sent money, arms, and helped train growing cadres of “Tamil Tigers<sup>73</sup>” demanding a separate Eelam Tamil nation<sup>74</sup> since the mid-1970s.

Indians of all ages, regions, and languages love their rivers. Before dawn Hindus go to the nearest river to bathe and pray, ritually washing themselves with water drawn in brass pots or clay dishes, holding their nostrils as they immerse their heads and bodies, bobbing up and down like happy porpoises or frolicking elephants. Every morning washerfolk (dhobiwale<sup>75</sup>) flock to India’s rivers with heavy bundles of dirty cloth, beating their wash against smooth stones before spreading colorful saris and white dhotis<sup>76</sup> out in the sun to dry along riverbanks. Religious festivals lure tens of millions to sacred river cities to dance and pray in tune with the ancient rhythms of the Hindu lunar calendar, often crushing, even at times killing themselves to reach the water at the precise instant astrologically reputed to be most auspicious for good health or long life! The River, like India, waits patiently, mutely watching, accepting folly and wisdom alike. Her bounty, now pure, now polluted, both gives and takes life from her countless children, much the way Mother Ganga<sup>77</sup> was reputed in Epic lore to have “drowned” each of her sons as soon as he was born, until her distracted husband, King Santanu<sup>78</sup>, begged her to desist from what he viewed as so barbaric a practice. Ganga





agreed and let their last son live, but as punishment for being pressured to do so, abandoned her poor husband, who never fully appreciated how perfectly divine a wife he had.

### 1.1.2 Heat

Heat is the most palpable, all-pervasive element of India's environment. Heat is to India what fog and rain are to England, what hazy sunshine and smog are to southern California. From March through early November most of India is hot, much of it sizzling. Indians worship several gods of heat: Vishnu<sup>79</sup> and Surya<sup>80</sup> as sun-gods, Agni<sup>81</sup> as god of fire. Coping with intense heat has probably taught Indians more of their philosophy than they like to admit. They may, indeed, have been the first people to make a virtue of necessity, but would not be the last. A general lack of "action-mindedness" long and often noted by foreign visitors as a common quality among Indians was perhaps India's first line of defense against heatstroke or sunstroke. Even Englishmen acclimatized to India's "noonday sun" and rarely stepped outside in it, unless they were up in Simla's<sup>82</sup> salubrious heights or those of some less renowned British hill station. Most Indians, of course, developed natural pigmentation to ward off the worst effects of heat, yet death from sunstroke remains common in India.



010

Intense heat may have inspired India's ancient rishis ("wise-men") to practice yoga meditation, thereby keeping themselves as "cool" as possible in what would otherwise have been a life-jeopardizing environment. We now recognize that yoga has many useful applications but slowing the body's metabolism by sitting still and controlling one's breath if not actually reducing the heartbeat is surely one of the best ways to diminish wear and tear. Divine yogis, such as Lord Shiva, used the single-pointed laserlike heat of their meditation to vaporize demons and other intruders on their peace by focusing a third-eye of fire on troublesome objects. Heat is also credited with creation, but the self-generating *tapas*<sup>83</sup> ("heat") that ancient hymns of India celebrate for sowing "seeds" of life was more closely related to erotic passion than solar energy.

Wherever India's heat is coupled with riverine waters or ample monsoon rains, the abundance of agricultural yields has been uniquely supportive of life. Population densities of well over 1,000 per square miles are thus found in most of the eastern Ganga's plain as well as Bengal, and along the narrow Malabar coast, where two – and often three – crops of rice are grown annually. Irrigation canals in the North have greatly expanded double and triple cropping, moreover, allowing India today to support more than double the population she had at the birth of her Republic in 1950, although at much the same bare margin of rough grain caloric subsistence for most

peasants. Owing to the expanded irrigation works, the use of chemical fertilizers, newly developed high-yielding seeds, and mechanized agriculture, the growing urban middle class and wealthiest segment of India's population enjoy a richer, more varied diet than had hitherto been possible. Average overall Indian yields of most crops remain, however, much lower than outputs in Japan, China, Canada, the United States, and most western European nations. The general enervating impact of heat may help account for such poor overall productivity.

South of Delhi an arc of primarily barren desert encompassing most of Rajasthan<sup>84</sup> may be found within a radius of more than 300 miles, and from Allahabad a similar half-circle to the south would cover most of Madhya Pradesh<sup>85</sup>, India's rugged, barren "Middle Province." Hindu *Rajputs*<sup>86</sup> ("Sons of Kings"), whose royal families dominated these central desert domains for more than a thousand years, appear to have invaded India from Central Asia early in the Christian era, although their astrologers trace their royal lineage to divinities of Sun and Moon. A golden sunburst remains the symbol of the Maharaja<sup>87</sup> of Mewar<sup>88</sup>, whose enchanting capital at Udaipur<sup>89</sup> is built around a lovely artificial lake, nestled in a natural fortress of hills, and was never conquered even by the mightiest of Great Mughals. The brilliantly beautiful colors worn by Rajasthani peasants, whose scarlet and saffron turbans and mirror-shimmering skirts and vests are among the brightest costumes in all of India, seem designed to offset the drab grays and mauves of nature's garb, even as the peacocks and green parrots of Rajasthan are among India's loveliest birds. Rajasthani bands of wandering musicians, dancers, and fortunetellers, known to history as "Gypsies" because they stopped for so many years in Egypt en route to Roumania, have added color to most of the world by now. Romani, the Gypsy language, is closest to Rajasthani, a modern Indo-tongue descended from Sanskrit and related to Hindi. With so little moisture and such intense heat, Rajasthan has never been able to support its population more than marginally and remains one of India's poorest states with the nation's lowest literacy rate, especially among women. Poverty has never diminished the artistry or high spirits of Rajasthan's populace.

If India ever learns to harness its solar energy economically, the desert states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh could become valuable centers of power generation and transmission. Even as oil reserves have catapulted Arabia to affluence, solar power might launch Central India into an age of rich growth and development, especially were it used to help tap Mother Ganga's perennial flow. India's major liability might then become her great asset.





### 1.1.3 Monsoon Rains

India's rainy "season" – *monsoon* – usually starts early in June and ends late in September. When the monsoon is on time, giant rain-fattened turbanlike clouds roll toward the elephant trunk profile of the peninsula's western littoral the first week in June. Without monsoon rains the entire Southern peninsula would be as dry as the desert of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. As June's summer sun heats India's land mass more quickly than it does the surrounding waters of the Indian Ocean, continental air rises and moisture-laden ocean air blows toward the land from the southwest. Everywhere in India the monsoon is welcomed with joyous song and dance. Ancient Brahmins kept a weather eye on the dark clouds that annually gathered to the southwest, noting precisely when they reached the coast and rose over the western Ghats mountains to drop their bounty of life-giving rain. The Soma<sup>90</sup> altar was thus designed and slowly constructed each year to be ready to light a few days before the monsoon started, so that it would seem as if Brahmanic mantras and sacrificial offerings brought the rain. Peasants timed their ploughing and sowing accordingly. If the rains came too early, of course, Brahmins lost credibility, and precious water was wasted on furrows devoid of seed. If the rains came late then crows and other scavengers reaped the only harvest, leaving Brahmins to chant and offer up Soma and *ghi* (ghee; clarified butter) to sacrificial fires in vain, while the prospect of grim famine loomed blacker than clouds on every horizon.



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India's still predominantly agricultural economy has often been called a "gamble in rains", since the monsoon of every year is when tanks and reservoirs, as well as most rivers and irrigation canals throughout the land, are given fresh sustenance that must last them until the next monsoon begins. Bumper harvests in recent years have finally given India sufficient surplus stocks of grain to avert the sort of famine disasters that decimated the land in the last decade of the nineteenth century and as recently as the terrible Bengal Famine of 1943, which claimed over 3 million lives. Monsoon failures sometimes come in two or three successive years, however, and no amount of government storage can provide adequate buffers against catastrophe of that order of magnitude. India's more than half a billion peasant population remains pathetically vulnerable to whims of nature and winds of change.

The Malabar Coast, south of Goa<sup>91</sup>, with its bounty of about two inches of rain during those turbulent monsoon months, has India's most beautiful beaches, palm-fringed and dotted with lagoons, surrounded by banana and mango groves, pepper trees, and cloves, with tea and coffee plantations thriving at higher elevations on the