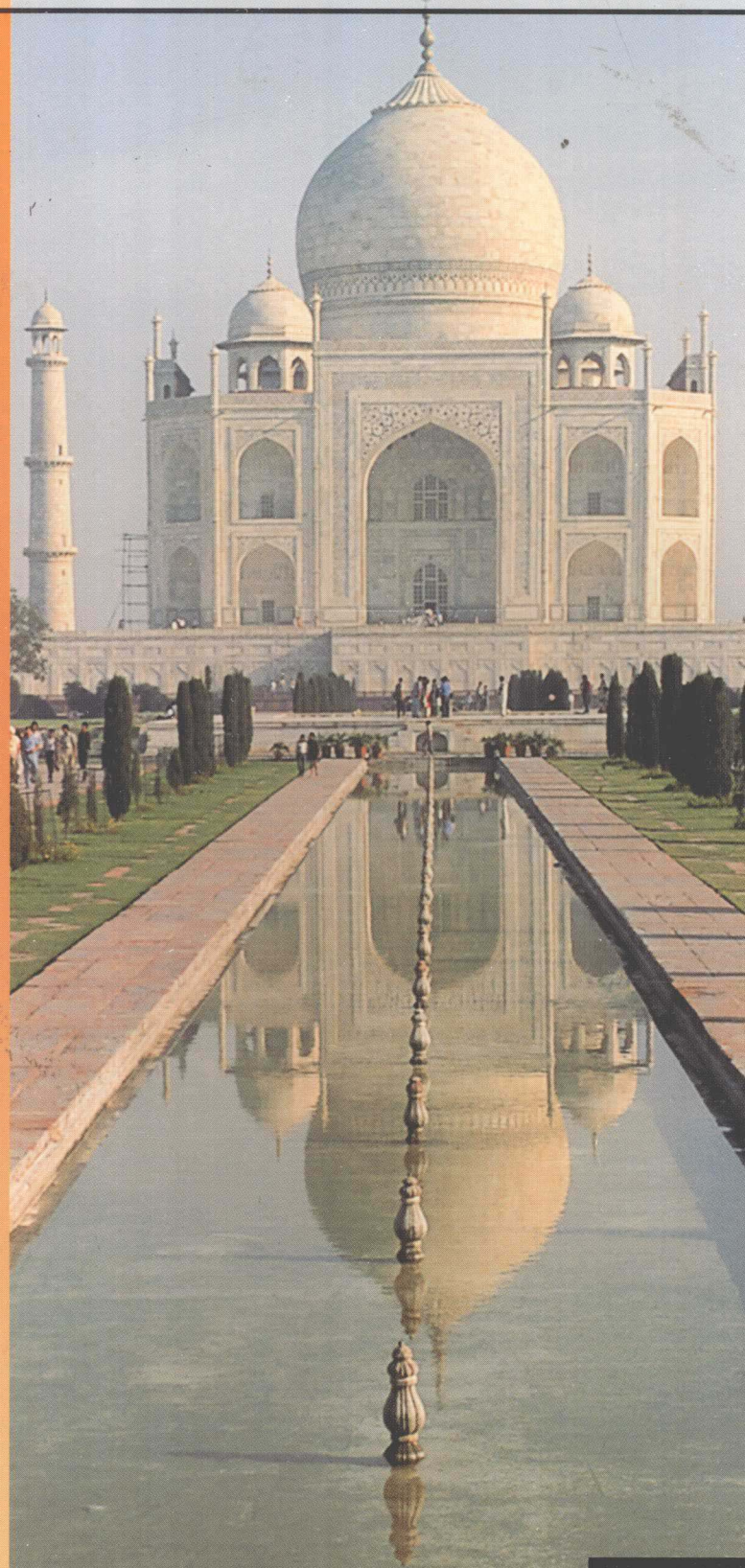
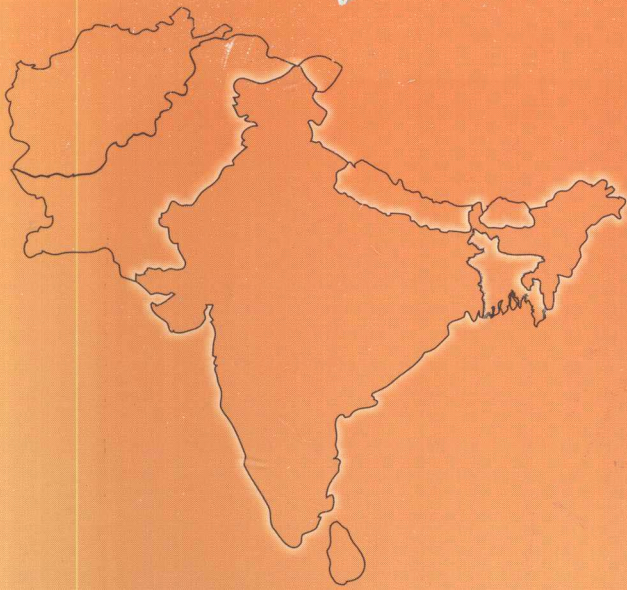


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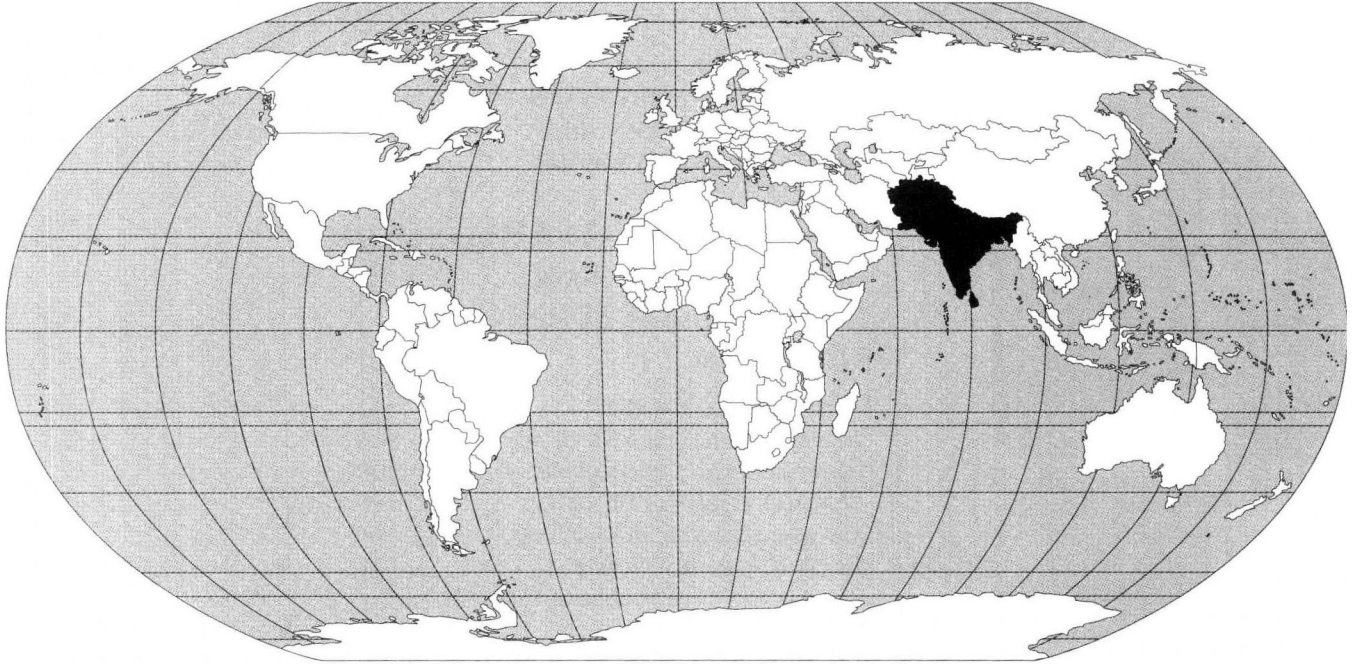
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India and South Asia



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Using Global Studies: India and South Asia

THE GLOBAL STUDIES SERIES

The Global Studies series was created to help readers acquire a basic knowledge and understanding of the regions and countries in the world. Each volume provides a foundation of information—geographic, cultural, economic, political, historical, artistic, and religious—that will allow readers to better assess the current and future problems within these countries and regions and to comprehend how events there might affect their own well-being. In short, these volumes present the background information necessary to respond to the realities of our global age.

Each of the volumes in the Global Studies series is crafted under the careful direction of an author/editor—an expert in the area under study. The author/editors teach and conduct research and have traveled extensively through the regions about which they are writing.

In this *India and South Asia* edition, the author/editor has written introductory essays on the South Asia region and country reports for each of the countries included.

MAJOR FEATURES OF THE GLOBAL STUDIES SERIES

The Global Studies volumes are organized to provide concise information on the regions and countries within those areas under study. The major sections and features of the books are described here.

Regional Essays

For *Global Studies: India and South Asia*, the author/editor has written an essay, “Images of South Asia,” focusing on the religious, cultural, sociopolitical, and economic differences and similarities of the countries and peoples in the region. A detailed map accompanies the essay.

Country Reports

Concise reports are written for each of the countries within the region under study. These reports are the heart of each Global Studies volume. *Global Studies: India and South Asia, Fifth Edition*, contains eight country reports, including India.

The country reports are composed of five standard elements. Each report contains a detailed map visually positioning the country among its neighboring states; a summary of statistical information; a current essay providing important historical, geographical, political, cultural, and economic information; a historical timeline, offering a convenient visual survey of a few key historical events; and four “graphic indicators,” with summary statements about the country in terms of development, freedom, health/welfare, and achievements.

A Note on the Statistical Reports

The statistical information provided for each country has been drawn from a wide range of sources. (The most frequently referenced are listed on page 204.) Every effort has been made to provide the most current and accurate information available. However, occasionally the information cited by these sources differs to some extent; and, all too often, the most current information available for some countries is dated. Aside from these difficulties, the statistical summary of each country is generally quite complete and up to date. Care should be taken,

however, in using these statistics (or, for that matter, any published statistics) in making hard comparisons among countries. We have also provided comparable statistics for the United States and Canada, which can be found on pages viii and ix.

World Press Articles

Within each Global Studies volume is reprinted a number of articles carefully selected by our editorial staff and the author/editor from a broad range of international periodicals and newspapers. The articles have been chosen for currency, interest, and their differing perspectives on the subject countries. There are 33 articles in *Global Studies: India and South Asia, Fifth Edition*.

The articles section is preceded by an annotated table of contents as well as a topic guide. The annotated table of contents offers a brief summary of each article, while the topic guide indicates the main theme(s) of each article. Thus, readers desiring to focus on articles dealing with a particular theme, say, the environment, may refer to the topic guide to find those articles.

WWW Sites

An extensive annotated list of selected World Wide Web sites can be found on the facing page (vii) in this edition of *Global Studies: India and South Asia*. In addition, the URL addresses for country-specific Web sites are provided on the statistics page of most countries. All of the Web site addresses were correct and operational at press time. Instructors and students alike are urged to refer to those sites often to enhance their understanding of the region and to keep up with current events.

Glossary, Bibliography, Index

At the back of each Global Studies volume, readers will find a glossary of terms and abbreviations, which provides a quick reference to the specialized vocabulary of the area under study and to the standard abbreviations used throughout the volume.

Following the glossary is a bibliography, which lists general works, national histories, and current-events publications and periodicals that provide regular coverage on India and South Asia.

The index at the end of the volume provides reference to the contents of the volume. Readers seeking specific information and citations should consult this standard index.

Currency and Usefulness

Global Studies: India and South Asia, like the other Global Studies volumes, is intended to provide the most current and useful information available necessary to understand the events that are shaping the cultures of the region today.

This volume is revised on a regular basis. The statistics are updated, regional essays and country reports revised, and world press articles replaced. In order to accomplish this task, we turn to our author/editor, our advisory boards, and—hopefully—to you, the users of this volume. Your comments are more than welcome. If you have an idea that you think will make the next edition more useful, an article or bit of information that will make it more current, or a general comment on its organization, content, or features that you would like to share with us, please send it in for serious consideration.

Selected World Wide Web Sites for India and South Asia

(Some Web sites continually change their structure and content, so the information listed here may not always be available. Check our Web site at: <http://www.dushkin.com/online/>—Ed.)

GENERAL SITES

1. BBC World Service—<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/sasia/>—The BBC, one of the world's most successful radio networks, provides the latest news from around the world and in South Asia at this site. It is possible to access the news in several languages.
2. CNN Online Page—<http://www.cnn.com>—U.S. 24-hour video news channel. News, updated every few hours, includes text, pictures, and film. Good external links.
3. C-SPAN ONLINE—<http://www.c-span.org>—See especially C-SPAN International on the Web for International Programming Highlights and archived C-Span programs.
4. International Network Information Center at University of Texas—<http://inic.utexas.edu>—Gateway has pointers to international sites, including South Asia.
5. Penn Library: Resources by Subject—<http://www.library.upenn.edu/resources/subject/subject.html>—This vast site is rich in links to information about Asian studies, including population and demography.
6. Political Science RESOURCES—<http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk>—Dynamic gateway to sources available via European addresses. Listed by country name.
7. ReliefWeb—<http://www.reliefweb.int>—UN's Department of Humanitarian Affairs clearinghouse for international humanitarian emergencies.
8. Social Science Information Gateway (SOSIG)—<http://sosig.esrc.bris.ac.uk>—Project of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). It catalogs 22 subjects and lists developing countries' URL addresses.
9. Speech and Transcript Center—<http://gwis2.circ.gwu.edu/~gprice/speech.htm>—This unusual site is the repository of transcripts of every kind, from radio and television, of speeches by world government leaders, and the proceedings of groups like the United Nations, NATO, and the World Bank.
10. United Nations System—<http://www.unsystem.org>—This is the official Web site for the United Nations system of organizations. Everything is listed alphabetically. Offers: UNICC; Food and Agriculture Organization.
11. UN Development Programme (UNDP)—<http://www.undp.org>—Publications and current information on world poverty, Mission Statement, UN Development Fund for Women, and more. Be sure to see Poverty Clock.
12. U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)—<http://www.info.usaid.gov>—U.S. policy toward assistance to Asian countries is available at this site.
13. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Home Page—<http://www.cia.gov/>—This site includes publications of the CIA, such as the World Factbook, Factbook on Intelligence, Handbook of International Economic Statistics, and CIA Maps.
14. U.S. Department of State Home Page—<http://www.state.gov/index.cfm>—Organized alphabetically: Country Reports, Human Rights, International Organizations, etc.
15. World Bank Group—<http://www.worldbank.org>—News (press releases, summary of new projects, speeches), publications, topics in development, countries and regions. Links to other financial organizations.
16. World Health Organization (WHO)—<http://www.who.int>—Maintained by WHO's headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, this comprehensive site includes a search engine.
17. World Trade Organization (WTO)—<http://www.wto.org>—Topics include foundation of world trade systems, data on textiles, intellectual property rights, legal frameworks, trade and environmental policies, recent agreements, and others.

GENERAL INDIA AND SOUTH ASIA SITES

18. ASEANWEB—<http://www.asean.or.id>—This official site of the Association of South East Asian Nations provides an overview of Asian Web sources, Summits, Economic and World Affairs, Publications, Political Foundations, Regional Cooperation.
19. Asia Web Watch—<http://www.ciolek.com/Asia-Web-Watch/main-page.html>—Here is a register of statistical data that can be accessed alphabetically. Data includes Asian Online Materials Statistics and Appendices about Asian cyberspace.
20. Asian Arts—<http://asianart.com>—Here is an online journal for the study and exhibition of the arts of Asia, which includes exhibitions, articles, and galleries.
21. Asian Studies WWW Virtual Library—<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/WWWVL-AsianStudies.html>—Australia National University maintains these sites, which link to many other Web sources, available at each country's location.
22. Asia-Yahoo—<http://www.yahoo.com/Regional/Regions/Asia/>—Specialized Yahoo search site permits keyword searches on Asian events, countries, and topics.
23. History of the Indian Sub-Continent—<http://loki.stockton.edu/~gilmorew/consortii/1aindia.htm>—As part of Stockton's World Wide Web Global History Research Institute, the history of the Indian subcontinent has been arranged chronologically at this site. This excellent resource contains maps, pictures, short writings, and scholarly writings.
24. South Asia Resources—<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/>—From this University of Berkeley Library site there is quick access to online resources in Asian studies as well as to South Asian specialists and other special features.

See individual country report pages for additional Web sites.

The United States (United States of America)

GEOGRAPHY

Area in Square Miles (Kilometers):

3,717,792 (9,629,091) (about 1/2 the size of Russia)

Capital (Population): Washington, D.C. (568,000)

Environmental Concerns: air and water pollution; limited freshwater resources; desertification; loss of habitat; waste disposal

Geographical Features: vast central plain, mountains in the west; hills and low mountains in the east; rugged mountains and broad river valleys in Alaska; volcanic topography in Hawaii

Climate: mostly temperate

PEOPLE

Population

Total: 276,000,000

Annual Growth Rate: 0.91%

Rural/Urban Population Ratio: 24/76

Major Languages: predominantly English; a sizable Spanish-speaking minority; many others

Ethnic Makeup: 69.1% white; 12.5% Latino; 12.1% black or African American; 3.6% Asian; 0.7% Amerindian

Religions: 56% Protestant; 28% Roman Catholic; 2% Jewish; 4% others; 10% none or unaffiliated

Health

Life Expectancy at Birth: 74 years (male); 80 years (female)

Infant Mortality Rate (Ratio): 6.82/1,000

Physicians Available (Ratio): 1/365

Education

Adult Literacy Rate: 97% (official; estimates vary widely)

Compulsory (Ages): 7–16; free

COMMUNICATION

Telephones: 173,000,000 main lines

Daily Newspaper Circulation: 238 per 1,000 people

Televisions: 776 per 1,000 people

Internet Service Providers: 7,6000 (1999 est.)

TRANSPORTATION

Highways in Miles (Kilometers): 3,906,960 (6,261,154)

Railroads in Miles (Kilometers): 149,161 (240,000)

Usable Airfields: 13,387

Motor Vehicles in Use: 206,000,000

GOVERNMENT

Type: federal republic

Independence Date: July 4, 1776

Head of State: President George W. Bush

Political Parties: Democratic Party; Republican Party; others of minor political significance

Suffrage: universal at 18

MILITARY

Military Expenditures (% of GDP): 3.8%

Current Disputes: none

ECONOMY

Per Capita Income/GDP: \$33,900/\$9.25 trillion

GDP Growth Rate: 4.1%

Inflation Rate: 2.2%

Unemployment Rate: 4.2%

Labor Force: 139,430,000

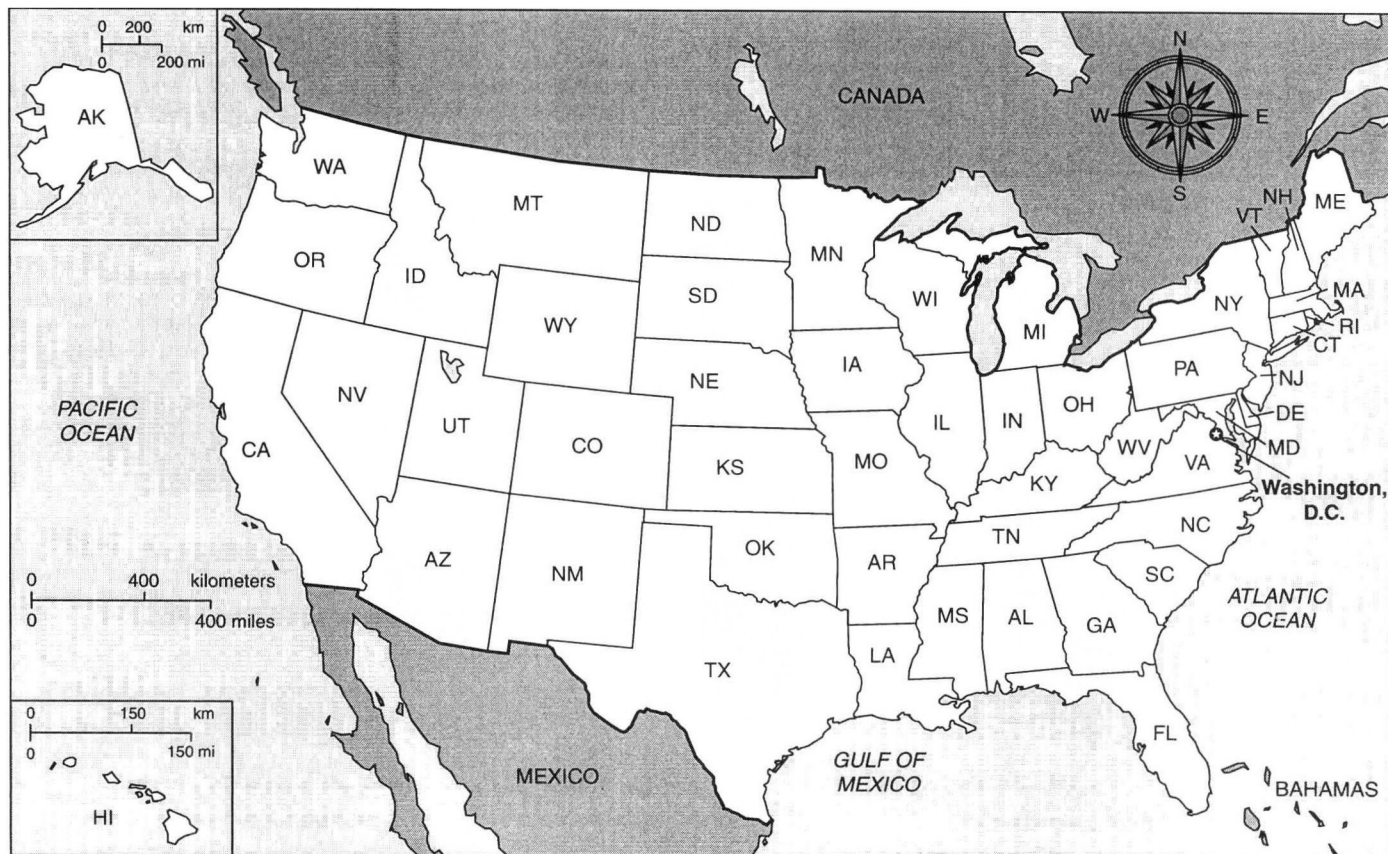
Natural Resources: minerals; precious metals; petroleum; coal; copper; timber; arable land

Agriculture: food grains; feed crops; fruits and vegetables; oil-bearing crops; livestock; dairy products

Industry: diversified in both capital- and consumer-goods industries

Exports: \$663 billion (primary partners Canada, Mexico, Japan)

Imports: \$912 billion (primary partners Canada, Japan, Mexico)



Canada

GEOGRAPHY

Area in Square Miles (Kilometers):

3,850,790 (9,976,140) (slightly larger than the United States)

Capital (Population): Ottawa (1,000,000)

Environmental Concerns: air pollution and resulting acid rain severely affecting lakes and damaging forests; water pollution; industrial damage to agriculture and forest productivity

Geographical Features: permafrost in the north hinders development, mountains in the west, central plains, and a maritime culture in the east

Climate: from temperate in south to subarctic and arctic in north

PEOPLE

Population

Total: 31,300,000

Annual Growth Rate: 1.02%

Rural/Urban Population Ratio: 23/77

Major Languages: both English and French are official

Ethnic Makeup: 28% British Isles origin; 23% French origin; 15% other European; 6% others; 2% indigenous; 26% mixed

Religions: 46% Roman Catholic; 16% United Church; 10% Anglican; 28% others

Health

Life Expectancy at Birth: 76 years (male); 83 years (female)

Infant Mortality Rate (Ratio): 5.08/1,000

Physicians Available (Ratio): 1/534

Education

Adult Literacy Rate: 97%

Compulsory (Ages): primary school

COMMUNICATION

Telephones: 18,500,000 main lines

Daily Newspaper Circulation: 215 per 1,000 people

Televisions: 647 per 1,000 people

Internet Service Providers: 750 (1999 est.)

TRANSPORTATION

Highways in Miles (Kilometers): 559,240 (902,000)

Railroads in Miles (Kilometers): 22,320 (36,000)

Usable Airfields: 1,411

Motor Vehicles in Use: 16,800,000

GOVERNMENT

Type: confederation with parliamentary democracy

Independence Date: July 1, 1867

Head of State/Government: Queen Elizabeth II; Prime Minister Jean Chrétien

Political Parties: Progressive Conservative Party; Liberal Party; New Democratic Party; Reform Party; Bloc Québécois
Suffrage: universal at 18

MILITARY

Military Expenditures (% of GDP): 1.2%
Current Disputes: none

ECONOMY

Currency (\$U.S. Equivalent): 1.53

Canadian dollars = \$1

Per Capita Income/GDP: \$23,300/\$722.3 billion

GDP Growth Rate: 3.6%

Inflation Rate: 1.7%

Labor Force: 15.1 million

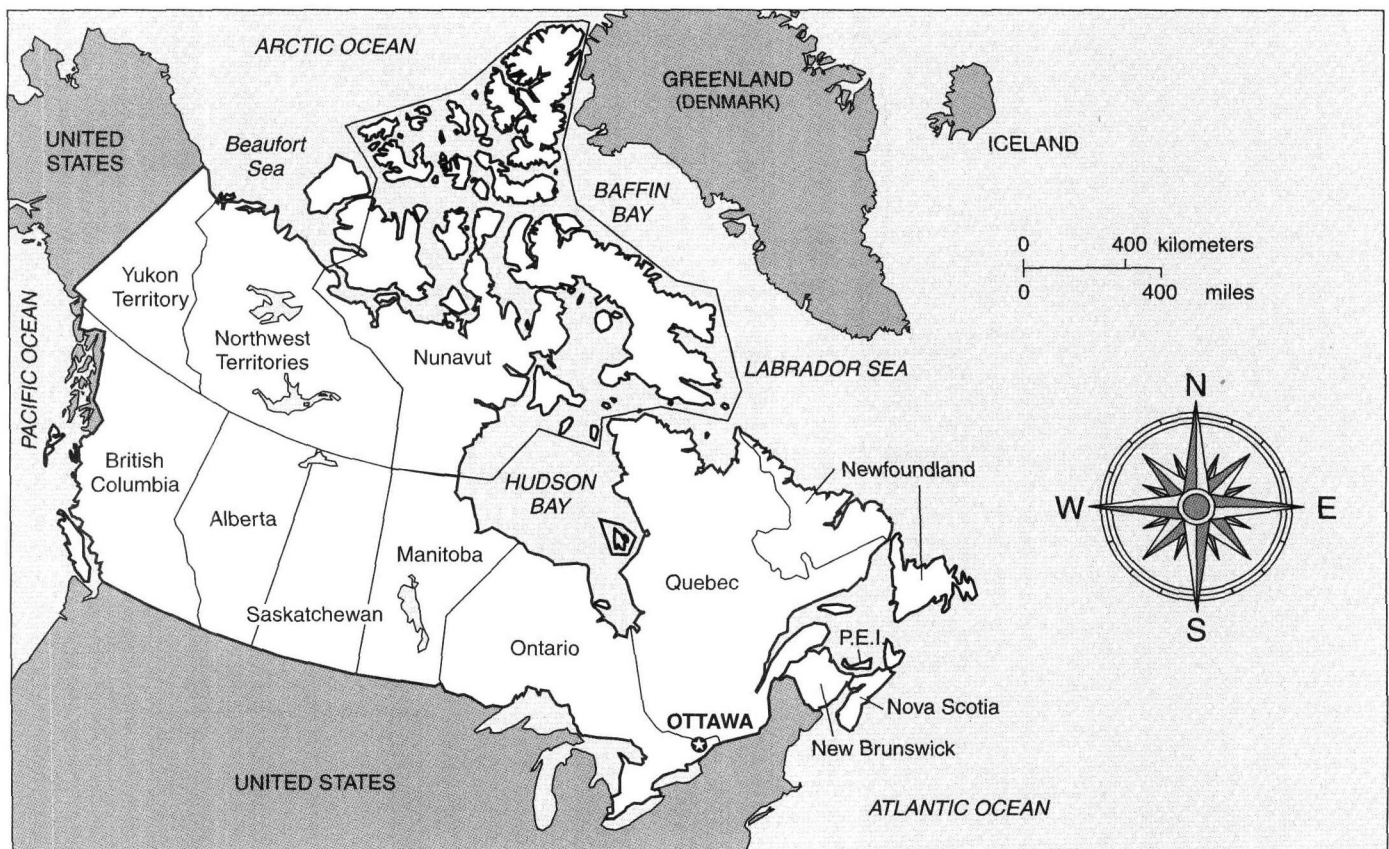
Natural Resources: petroleum; natural gas; fish; minerals; cement; forestry products; wildlife; hydropower

Agriculture: grains; livestock; dairy products; potatoes; hogs; poultry and eggs; tobacco; fruits and vegetables

Industry: oil production and refining; natural-gas development; fish products; wood and paper products; chemicals; transportation equipment

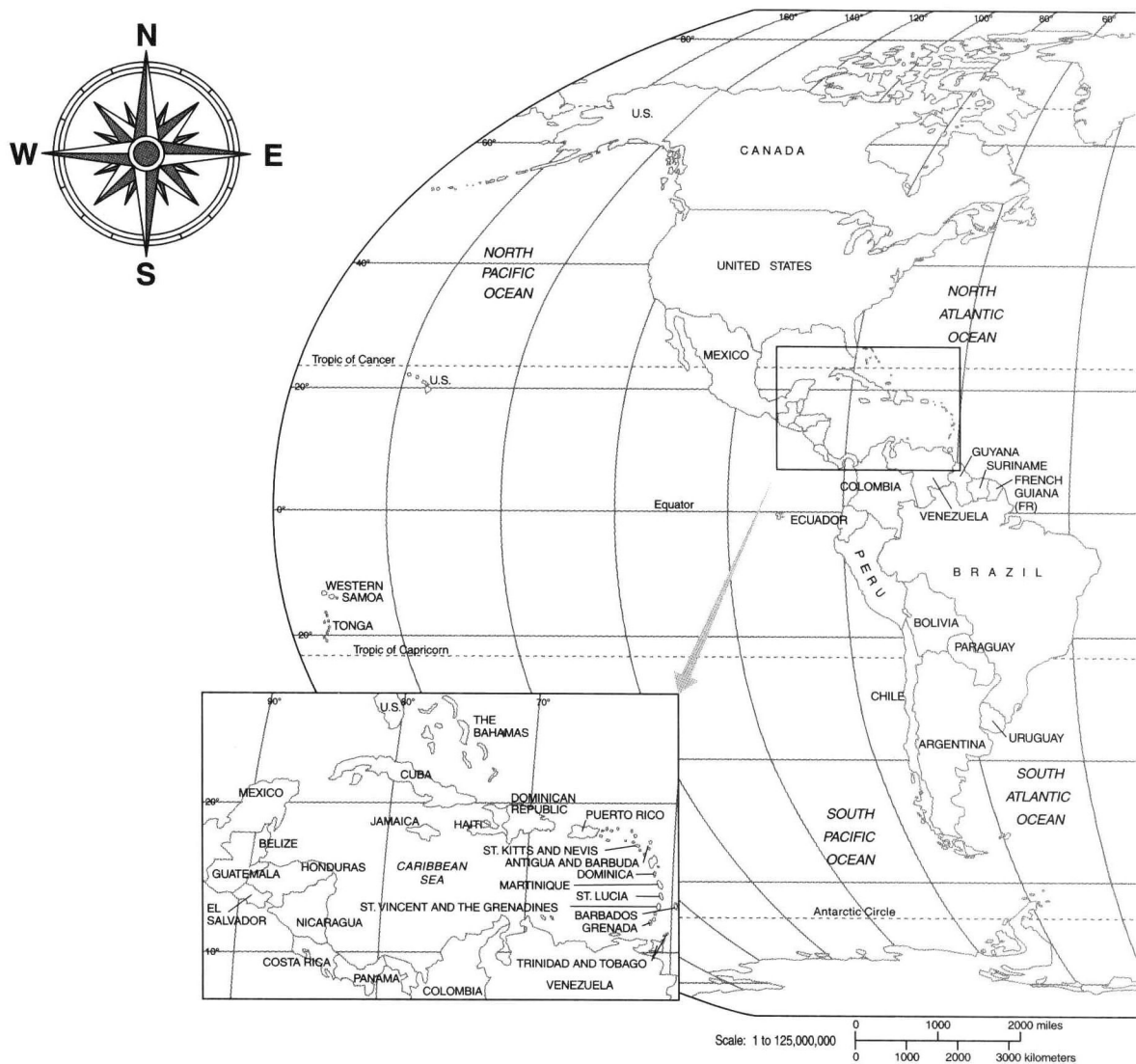
Exports: \$277 billion (primary partners United States, Japan, United Kingdom)

Imports: \$259.3 billion (primary partners United States, Japan, United Kingdom)



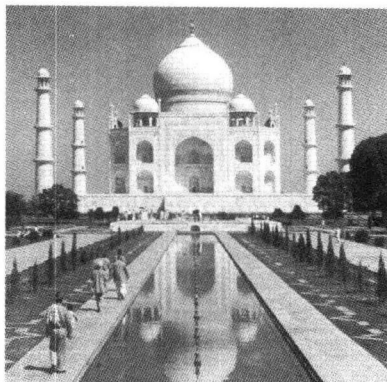
GLOBAL STUDIES

This map is provided to give you a graphic picture of where the countries of the world are located, the relationship they have with their region and neighbors, and their positions relative to the superpowers and power blocs. We have focused on certain areas to illustrate these crowded regions more clearly.



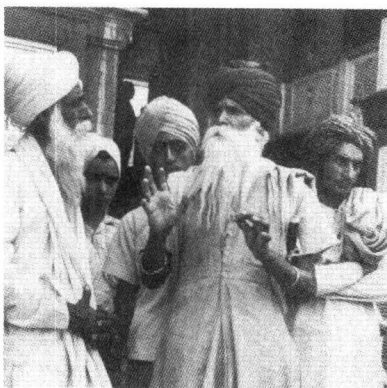
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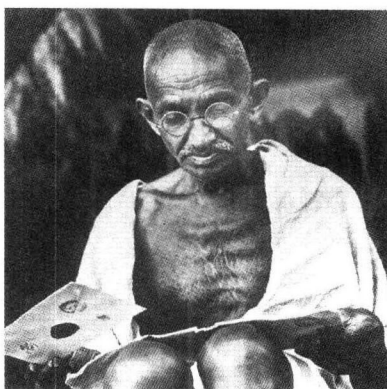
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South Asia

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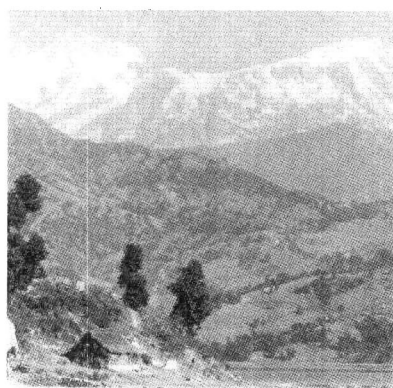
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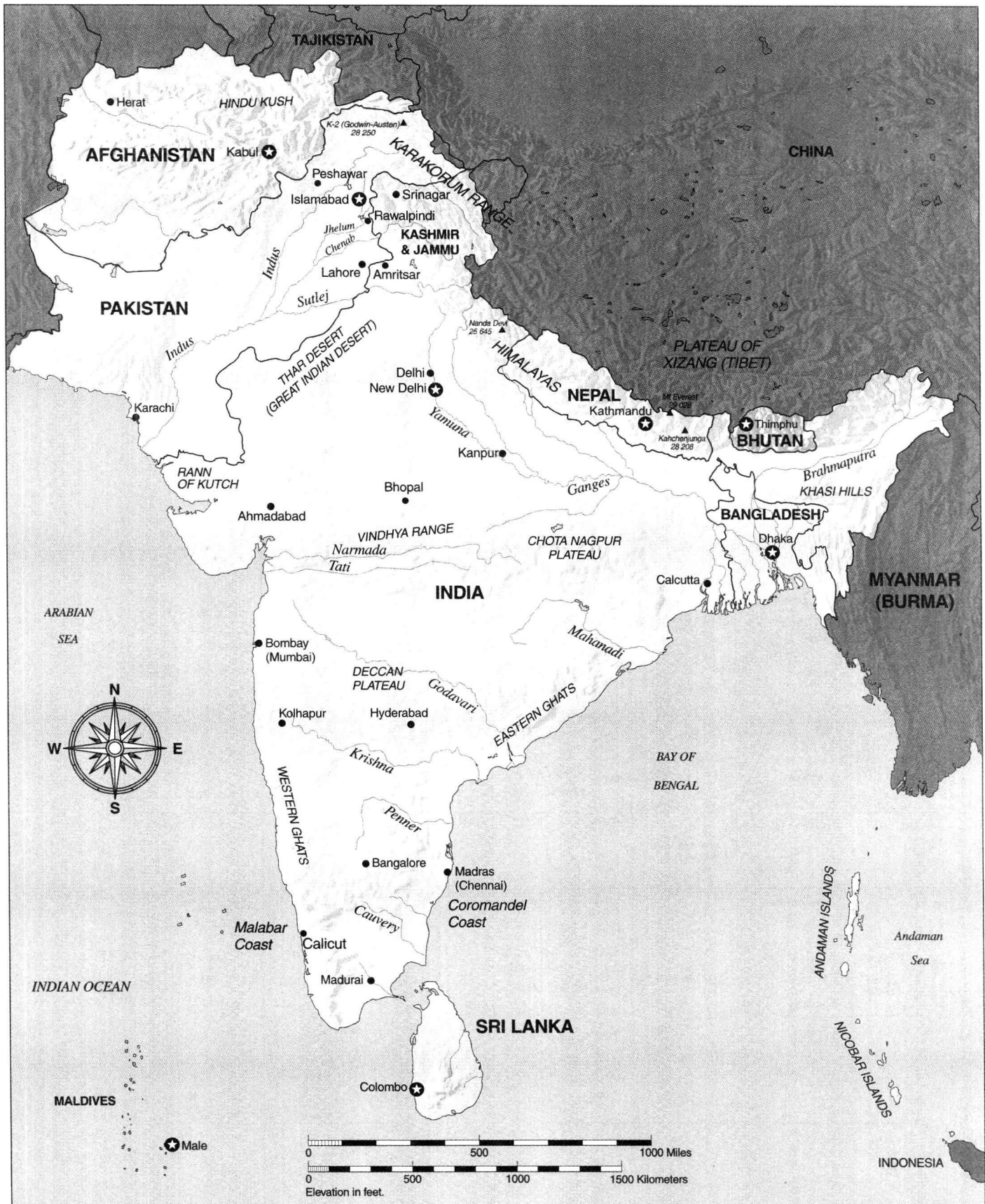


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India and South Asia



Images of South Asia

South Asia is a unique part of the world. We recognize South Asian women because of their distinctive dress, called *saris* or *salwar-chemises*, and the cosmetic red mark called *bindu* on their foreheads. Men might wear *dhotis*, *jodhpurs*, or sometimes trousers and notched-collar Nehru jackets. Some men wrap turbans about their heads. Indian cooking, with its delightfully spicy curries, has a flavor all its own. And Indian music, played on the *sitar*, *vina*, or *sharod*, has tonal scales called *ragas* and follows rhythm patterns that are different from Western styles of music. These experiences identify what is normal for a people whose native place and culture, languages and traditions are distinct. Even South Asians' attitudes and assumptions about such elemental realities as truth, life, time, and life-after-death are different from those held in other parts of the world.

Some contributions that the world has received from the subcontinent identify the uniqueness of South Asia. Zero, the most symbolic and elusive of all numbers, was added to the traditional ways of counting in the West only after Arab traders brought it from South Asia in a system known, for that reason as Arabic numbers. Linguistics, the study of the structure of language, also had its origin in South Asia. *Yoga*, a spiritual discipline increasingly pursued in the West, has been practiced in South Asia since ancient times. And *satyagraha* (nonviolent resistance) was developed in the twentieth century by India's "Mahatma" Gandhi as an alternative to power politics. These contributions reveal the extent and variety of creative ideas that evolved in the unique cultural environment of South Asia for the benefit of all humankind.

There are also some common challenges that the peoples of this region share with other parts of the world. Population density and growth, environmental degradation, national identity, economic development, social equality and women's rights, child labor, illiteracy, poverty, and disease (among which is an alarming increase in the cases of HIV/AIDS) are all issues that affect the well-being of everyone in the world. How the peoples of South Asia respond to these challenges is important, not only for their own well-being but also toward assuring a future for us all.

OUT OF MANY VIEWS, A PORTRAIT

This essay focuses on five images of South Asia. These images are not definitive. Rather, they intend to point to a comprehensive picture of what we can learn from this immensely varied part of the world.

The first image is that South Asia is a distinct geographical and cultural region inhabited by more than 1.3 billion people, one fifth of the total population of the world. These people live in a clearly defined space, about a quarter of the size of North America, set apart from the rest of the world by high mountains and ocean waters. In this space a unique and ancient history has shaped the cultures, languages, social patterns, institutions, and religious traditions in ways that are quite different from those found anywhere else.

Study of the setting of the lives and traditions of the peoples of South Asia provides a basis for mutual respect and understanding, where a lack of such awareness may lead to stereotyping and mistrust. In an increasingly interconnected world, ignorance of such a significant portion of the world's population is not only deplorable, but it can also be dangerous. A recent example is the portrayal in the Western press of India as war-mongering and violent because of its nuclear testing in May 1999 and its refusal to sign the Comprehensive (Nuclear) Test Ban Treaty passed by the United Nations in September 1996. This characterization of India, at the very least, does not take adequate account of the security risks that India faces in its unsettled disputes over its 2,800-mile border with China.

The second image is that South Asia is an incredibly diverse as well as crowded multicultural environment. The large population is currently divided among eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. As islands, the borders of Maldives and Sri Lanka are defined by geography. But the borders of Sri Lanka and all the other countries of the region, with the exception of Bangladesh, do not enclose peoples of common language and ethnic origin. The countries are all multicultural, with a wide diversity of social groups who speak different languages and follow distinct customs and separate religious traditions.

Their boundaries also separate peoples of shared ethnicity, language, and religion into different nationalities. The Pathans, for example, were divided by the border established between British India and Afghanistan in 1907. In 1979, at the time of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, about 6 million Pathans—more than a third of the total population of Afghanistan—lived on the Afghan side. Another 10 million lived on the other side of the border, constituting the dominant population in the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan.

India, by far the largest country in South Asia, with more than 75 percent of the total population and occupying 64 percent of the land of the subcontinent, is socially and linguistically the most diverse. Seventeen distinct, indigenous languages, each with innumerable dialects, are recognized in the Constitution of India. Each is dominant in a different part of the country, and none is spoken by a majority of the population. Only English, although foreign in origin and spoken by less than 6 percent of the people, serves as the "link language" among all the many distinct linguistic regions of India.

People living in the same place who all speak the same language are also divided into extended kinship groups called caste (*jati*) communities. These communities sustain accepted norms of behavior, dress, and diet for all of their members. They are also endogamous, which means that families are expected to find marriage partners for their children among other families within the group. Many are identified by a traditional occupation, from which each derives its name, such as *dhobi* (washerman community), *gujar* (goat herder

community), and *jat* (farmer community). There are hundreds of thousands of such kinship groups throughout the country. In a normal village setting, individuals will interact on a daily basis with others from about 20 different jatis. The locally accepted position of their jatis in a social hierarchy, generally termed the *caste system*, will determine the expected social norms of their daily interactions. One's position in the immediate family is also highly proscribed by traditional expectations, maintained in most instances by the patriarchal structure of the family.

Another significant division in all of the countries of the subcontinent is between the urban and the rural populations. Rural dwellers outnumber city dwellers three to one. Those who live in villages also contrast vividly in maintaining more traditional customs and lifestyles than those in the cities. Another striking contrast, in both the cities and villages, is between those who are wealthy and the multitude of the very poor.

That such a diverse population lives in such crowded circumstances, with everyone drawing upon limited resources, is a great achievement—and a constant challenge. There is no shortage of causes for altercation among socially distinct groups. Extensive outbursts, rampaging, and rioting do occur among competitive factions and differing religious communities, as well as outright warfare among militant nationalist organizations and between nation-states. Yet for most of the subcontinent, there is a heritage of accommodation and an expectation of tolerance among peoples of differing customs, languages, and religious faiths. To understand something of the complex patterns of social interaction that exist in South Asia, to see how it does and doesn't work, should be helpful to other peoples as they become more multiculturally conscious.

The next two images amplify the first two images of South Asia as a distinct, diverse, and crowded cultural region of the world. The third image looks toward the past, at the classical heritage of the peoples of the subcontinent, known as the "Great Tradition," to see how it underlies and sustains the complex and persistent social diversity in South Asia. The fourth image looks at the impact of democracy in the subcontinent today, especially among peoples whose primary sense of identity is ethnic, religious, and linguistic, as sustained by one's jati community—rather than political, as a nation.

The third image, of the Great Tradition of South Asia, has its earliest discernible roots in two vastly different sources. One is the Harappan city culture. Archeological remains of this ancient urban culture reveal organizational and commercial skills developed in these Indus River Valley cities more than 4,500 years ago. Another source is the Vedic tradition, recorded in a sacred literature that contains the religious musings of a robust, cow-herding people, called Aryans. They drove their horse-drawn war chariots into the subcontinent from Central Asia a thousand years later. Over the course of many centuries, these two heritages were coalesced, elabo-



(UN Photo 153428/John Isaac)

The sheer multitude of people who live in South Asia is mind-boggling: More than 1.3 billion crowd the subcontinent, and despite some successes in family planning, that number is climbing rapidly.

rated, appended, and refined into classical forms that became normative for the way civilized people in that region of the world should perceive and participate in life. These forms provided the structure for immense intellectual and artistic creativity, which produced many outstanding works of thought and art.

Because of the skill, discipline, and depth of insight achieved by South Asia's classical thinkers and artisans, their accumulated works are intellectually challenging and inspiring. The tradition that they created reveals an enduring perspective on our world that can be broadening and self-affirming for us, as well as giving some definition to the uniqueness of South Asian cultures. An awareness of this Great Tradition also provides a context for understanding the introduction of democracy as a political force among the nations of South Asia. In addition, it offers alternative paths

to realize the goals of democracy in a world torn by ethnic violence and warfare.

The fourth image of South Asia looks at the introduction of democracy into the subcontinent as a primary instrument of political modernization. Democracy is having a profound impact not only on the form and goals of governments in the countries of South Asia; it is also changing the bases of people's interaction with one another. Democratically elected representative government is a modern Western institution, introduced by the British colonial government during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its introduction has brought about a number of far-reaching issues. All of the countries have had to deal with challenges of national identity, of the relation of religion to nationalism, of refugees, and of political stability. These issues have produced unanticipated, sometimes traumatic, consequences for many millions of people. Yet today, more people live under democratic rule in South Asia than in any other part of the world. There is much that we can learn about democracy by examining the various ways that it has come to function in the South Asian cultural setting.

Finally, in a fifth image, we focus attention on Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, called the *Mahatma*, the "Great-Souled One." During the early 1900s, Gandhi evolved an effective process of nonviolent political resistance. He also developed a style of leadership that drew upon a unique combination of the classical norms and modern aspirations described in the previous two images of South Asia. He articulated, in enviable simplicity, the profound perspective of the classical tradition in committing himself not just to the removal of colonial domination, to political independence, but to true freedom for an oppressed people. He thus empowered those who today are citizens of India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Nepal to participate in the destiny of new, democratically ruled nations in the modern world.

To understand Gandhi and his leadership role is to realize how much he embodied what is distinct about the peoples of South Asia. Yet it is in his uniqueness as an individual among a specific people that he speaks to us all. No one else in the twentieth century had so wide and positive an impact on the political awareness and empowerment of oppressed peoples all over the world.

IMAGE 1: SOUTH ASIA, A DISTINCT LAND AND AN ANCIENT CIVILIZATION

A. K. Ramanujan used to tell the story of a Mongolian conqueror who had a certain species of nightingale brought to him from Kashmir because he had heard that this bird sang the most beautiful song in the world. But when the bird arrived, it did not sing. It was explained to the enraged conqueror that the bird sang only when perched on the branch of a chinar tree, and that the chinar tree grows only on the hillsides of Kashmir. Ramanujan concluded this story of what

the conqueror needed to do to get his captured nightingale to sing, with these words of St.-John Perse:

We know the story of that Mongolian conqueror, taker of a bird in its nest, and of the nest in its tree, who brought back with the bird and nest and song the whole natal tree itself, torn from its place with its multitude of roots, its ball of earth and its border of soil, a remnant of home territory evoking a field, a province, a country, and an empire. . . .

—St.-John Perse, *Birds*

(cited in A. K. Ramanujan, *Poems of Love and War*)

A DISTINCT LAND

The land on which the people of South Asia live is clearly set apart from the rest of Asia as a geographical area. Geologically speaking, it is a recent addition to the continent. About 100 million years ago, it broke away from the east coast of Africa and drifted slowly on a separate geological plate east and north, until it collided, about 28 million years ago, with the southern edge of the continental landmass of Asia. The immense power of this impact scrunched up the south coast of Asia. It pushed the Tibetan Plateau more than three miles into the air and created a high ridge of snow-clad peaks, which today mark the line of impact. This mountain range, the Himalayas, is the highest in the world, and it is still rising (at a rate of about 10 inches per century) as a result of the massive collision that occurred so many millions of years ago.

The perimeters of the subcontinent are still clearly delineated by nature—on the north, by the high, forbidding Himalayas; on the south, by the vast expanse of the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Indian Ocean. The high mountain peaks and vast ocean waters dominate the landscape. They also produce the annual monsoons, the seasonal torrents of rain upon which the livelihood of the people of South Asia depends.

Within these natural borders is a wide range of geographical conditions, of topography and climate, that divide into four distinct regions. First, farthest to the north, are the frigid, arctic heights of the south face of the Himalayan Mountains. All of Afghanistan and Bhutan, most of Nepal, and small portions of India and Pakistan fall within this region.

These mountainous Himalayan lands fall precipitously and dramatically toward the south into the second region—the wide, alluvial river valleys that stretch across the north-central portion of the subcontinent. Three river systems—the Indus, the Jumna-Ganges, and the Brahmaputra—all begin within 100 miles of one another in the Himalayas, but flow in three different directions through the mountains and down into the expanse of the north-central plains. The Indus flows to the west, through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea. The Jumna-Ganges Rivers flow to the south, and then join to flow east across the great northern plain, to where they merge with the Brahmaputra River. The Brahmaputra flows to the east from

its Himalayan source, and then south into Bangladesh. Both river systems then flow together, through many tributaries, into the Bay of Bengal.

All three river systems provide the north-central plains with a steady, if uneven, flow of melting snow. Because of this flow through the temperate northern plains, this region is the most widely irrigated and has the most productive agricultural lands of the subcontinent.

To the south of the northern plains region, entirely in India, are the highlands of the peninsula, which project out into the Indian Ocean. The highlands rise to a wide plateau, called the Deccan, which is bordered to the east and west by smaller, but older, mountains than the Himalayas. The central portion of Sri Lanka also rises to highlands, which, together with the Deccan, form the third geographically distinct region of the subcontinent. Because these highlands are not high enough to be snow-covered, farmers in this region are entirely dependent upon the seasonal monsoonal rains for sufficient water to cultivate the land.

From these highlands, the land slopes down into the fourth region, the coastal plains and tropical beaches of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Maldives. Most of South Asia's largest cities, which developed as trading posts during the seventeenth century and are now great centers of commerce, fall within this coastal region.

These four distinct regions, which also include desert and rain forest, present as wide a range of topography and climate as exists anywhere in the world. Together, appended to the southern side of Asia, they form a varied and isolated geographical space.

AN ANCIENT CIVILIZATION

Maritime Commerce

The earliest evidence of a distinctive South Asian culture is found in the archeological sites of the world's earliest known urban civilization. This Harappan city culture flourished in the Indus River Valley, in the northwestern portion of the subcontinent, from 3000 to 1500 B.C. Excavations of these ancient Harappan sites have revealed that the early city dwellers produced enough surplus, primarily in cotton and grains, to carry on trade well beyond their own region. Their commercial activity extended into the developing civilizations in the Fertile Crescent, Africa and Europe to the west, and Southeast Asia and China to the east.

This trading shows that from earliest times, the ocean waters into which the subcontinent projects have been not so much a barrier as a vital concourse. Maritime commerce has continued to be a major activity along the shores of the subcontinent, from the days of Harappan mercantile enterprise, through the era of silk trade, to the fiercely competitive activity of European trading companies in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, into the present day.

As a result of this crucial location on international trade routes, the peoples of South Asia have interacted with the major currents of human civilization since very ancient times. This interaction brought peacocks out of the subcontinent to embellish the throne of King Solomon in ancient Israel, the number zero to Europe during the Renaissance to change the way mathematical computations are done in the West, and Buddhism to become a major religious faith in East Asia and the rest of the world.



AN ANCIENT CIVILIZATION

What He Said

As a little white snake
with lovely stripes on its young body
troubles the jungle elephant
this slip of a girl
her teeth like sprouts of new rice
her wrists stacked with bangles
troubles me.

—Catti Natana r Kur 119
(translated by A. K. Ramanujan)

This small statue of a girl was cast in bronze more than 4,000 years ago in Mohenjo Daro, the ancient city of the Harappan civilization in the Indus River Valley. Lost in the sands that buried that city so long ago, her image was captured 2,000 years later by a south Indian poet at the other end of the subcontinent, some 2,000 miles away, in this love poem found in the classical Tamil Sangam anthology called the *Kuruntokai*. Recovered in the twentieth century from the excavations of the ancient city and in the translations of the classical Sangam poetry, we, too, are tantalized by this tiny yet enduring image from South Asia.