

the subcontinent of south asia

Many civilizations have evolved in Asia during the past 7,000 years. Few civilizations, however, have exerted more widespread influence on Asians than the civilizations that developed on the **subcontinent** of South Asia. The ways and ideas of the subcontinent's present-day inhabitants have derived from the patterns of living of several hundred generations of people. The subcontinent's civilizations, moreover, have spread into lands to the north, south, east, and west. At the same time, the people of the subcontinent have adopted and adapted the customs, thought, and inventions of many other peoples. The result has been a depth of heritage and a diversity of cultures that have had a far-reaching influence on South Asia's present-day nations—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, as well as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan.

The subcontinent has attracted almost all the major groups of the Eurasian landmass, either as invaders or as migrants. The mix of peoples has given South Asia a tremendous diversity. The diversity has fostered the growth of more languages and dialects than are found in any other area of comparable size in the entire world. The diversity is also evident in religion. Several major world religions have developed in this region. Today one out of every six people in the world lives in the subcontinent of South Asia.

1. Invasion as a Way of Life:

To look at a physical relief map, one would think that the sub-continental region of South Asia was secure from invasion. The entire northern border is guarded by the highest peaks in the world. In the north and northwest the Kirthar, Sulaiman, and Hindu Kush mountain ranges mark a natural border between the subcontinent and the long-settled plateau of Afghanistan and Iran. These mountain ranges fuse with the towering Himalaya system, which extends in a southeasterly direction for more than 1,500 miles. The jagged and forbidding peaks of the Himalayan ranges separate northern India from Tibet, now a part of the People's Republic of China. Farther east the mountain ranges protect the northeastern part of South Asia from overland invasion. The rest of the subcontinent is separate from other parts of the settled world by vast expanses of ocean and sea. Despite these natural barriers, South Asia has never been free from attack. Its history has been changed time and again by invaders in search of empire, riches, or fame.

Invasion Routes by Land and Sea

Rarely did new peoples come in peace. Most of them came as plunderers or would-be conquerors. Almost without exception the invaders came from the northwest through the easily traveled mountain passes. The most commonly used route was the Khyber Pass. The northwest came under attack so often because it borders the plateau region of Afghanistan and Iran, one of the oldest inhabited areas in the world. During the past 4,500 years in this region many civilizations, empires, and kingdoms rose and fell. Often great conquerors such as Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great, and Genghis Khan overran the plateau highlands and advanced through the passes into the northwestern plains of the subcontinent. The lower half of the subcontinent is the world's largest peninsula. The triangular landmass lies between Africa and Asia, intersecting major sea routes between the West and the East. Records from archaeological discoveries indicate that the Romans may have had trading settlements on the western coast before the first century. Other records show that Chinese merchants brought cargoes to the eastern coast. Arabs also came and, along with the Chinese, settled in peninsular India where they acted as go-betweens, transporting goods east and west around the wedge of the subcontinent. During the 1500's and 1600's various European countries established trading centers on the eastern and western coasts of the subcontinent. By the late 1700's Great Britain controlled most of the seaward approaches to the subcontinent, and consequently most of the trade. Gradually the British position changed from privileged trader to ruler as the British extended their influence and power over the entire subcontinent. By the mid-1800's Britain had made the subcontinent part of its great empire. Ironically, the last and greatest of the subcontinent's conquerors came not by land, but by the sea.

British Control

Once in control, Great Britain assumed the burden of defending the subcontinent against other potential invaders. British sea power was uncontested, and with Britain controlling the seas, South Asia was in little danger. To guard the landward approaches from the east, the British either took over a country, which they did in Burma, or made protectorates of weak states, which they once did in the Himalayan states of Nepal and Bhutan and in the former state of Sikkim which is now a part of the Republic of India. The only threat to British South Asia came during World War II when the Japanese easily overran Burma and could have crossed the subcontinent's borders. But the Japanese chose not to move into the subcontinent.

Britain's major defensive burden was to control the passes in the northwest. In the decade before World War I this involved making Afghanistan and Persia (present-day Iran) buffers against possible Russian advances. During World War II the British erected anti-tank defenses in the passes, and no invader breached the subcontinent's borders. Thus not once during the century of British rule did another power successfully invade the subcontinent.

Present-Day Watchfulness

Today the task of guarding the subcontinent's borders falls to the nations that have been carved out of the region—India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. As in centuries past, the peoples of the subcontinent uneasily watch the lands and peoples beyond the mountains. Of special concern to India is its border with China. During the 1950's the Chinese Communists took control of Tibet. In 1962, operating from Tibet, Chinese troops advanced into India. A cease-fire agreement was reached and the Chinese withdrew, but the border between the two countries continues to be disputed. Pakistan is wary of Afghanistan, a country that lays claim to certain Pakistani lands that have large Afghan populations. But of greater concern to India and Pakistan has been defense against each other as the two nations fight for control of sections of the border between their two countries.

2. The Geographic Setting:

Over the great span of history many divisive factors have been at work in the subcontinent, mostly the result of geographical conditions. Geography has made the subcontinent "a world apart" and has helped splinter the subcontinent into several well-defined natural regions. Besides the region of the Himalayas and other mountain ranges, the subcontinent can be divided into three other main geographic regions—the Indo-Gangetic Plain of the north, the Interior plateau called the Deccan, and the strips of coastal plain that rest against the Deccan and extend southward to the subcontinent's tip.

The Himalayas

The Himalayan system of mountain ranges towers above every other landform on the earth. Composed of three parallel ranges, the Himalayas form the northernmost boundary of the Indian subcontinent, arcing northward for some 1,500 miles. The southernmost range, called the Siwalik or Outer Himalayas, rises from the Indo-Gangetic Plain to an elevation of 5,000 feet. This is the plain formed by the Indus and Ganges rivers. The second range, the Lesser Himalayas, has peaks of 7,000 to 10,000 feet. The third range is the Great Himalayas. Forming the southern boundary of China, the crests of this range average 20,000 feet and include the world's highest peak. Mount Everest, now measured at 29,108 feet. To the northwest of the Great Himalayas, and included by some geographers in the Himalayan system, are the Karakoram Mountains. They are said to be the snowiest and iciest mountains between the world's two polar caps. The second highest mountain in the world, Mount Godwin Austen, also called K₂, rises to a height of 28,250 feet in this range.

The name Himalaya, is a combination of two words taken from Sanskrit, the ancient language of the subcontinent, that mean "dwelling place of snow." Thus Himalayas is an appropriate name for mountain ranges whose higher peaks are always covered with a blanket of snow. So high are the mountains that the climate changes several times from the steamy rain forest of the foothills to the below-freezing temperatures at the top of Mount Everest where the air has so little oxygen that the human body can barely survive for any length of time.

According to recent geologic theories about earth movements and landform building, the Himalayas formed when two of the earth's moving plates collided millions of years ago. Fossils of seashells found on high Himalayan peaks support the theory that a massive collision took place, pushing part of the ocean floor atop the continental landmass. Pressures within the earth resulting from the force of the collision continued the process of mountain building begun by the collision. Even today these forces lift the mountain ranges about two inches a year.

The Indo-Gangetic Plain

For many centuries the most heavily populated and most highly developed part of the subcontinent has been the Indo-Gangetic Plain of the north. Because this region has fertile soil and water for irrigation, it has always had a large agricultural population. It is here that early civilizations on the subcontinent evolved and most of the area's great empires and monarchies were founded.

Hindustan, the land of the Hindus, is an old and popular name for this northern region, which extends from the mountainous frontier in the west to the hills and rain forests of Burma in the east. The region's northern limits are bounded by the crests of the Himalaya ranges. The southern limits of the Indo-Gangetic Plain is marked by the Vindhya Hills. While these hills of moderate height have always slowed the north-south movements of peoples, cultures, and armies, they may be crossed without difficulty.

The rich soil of the northern region is part of a broad, seemingly endless plain cut by three important river systems: the Indus, the Ganges, and the Brahmaputra. The Indo-Gangetic Plain contains most of present-day

Pakistan, part of Bangladesh, and the most heavily populated regions of present-day India. The plain is well described in a classical geographic study:

Inside the mountain wall, and forming a great curve from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal, is one of the most important plains in the world. It is more than 2,000 miles from end to end, and usually from 150 to 300 miles broad. There are several outstanding features of this amazing area. One is the dead flatness of the plain—not a hill, scarcely a mound to break the monotony of the level surface. . . . True, there are foothills, such as the Siwaliks, . . . but they occupy . . . a zone which is inconspicuous in its width.

[L. Dudley Stamp. *Asia: A Regional, and Economic Geography*.]

Today the Indo-Gangetic Plain is one of the most densely populated regions of the world, probably holding close to 600 million people, most of whom are peasants who reside in the valley's countless villages. Like the rest of the subcontinent, the region contains few really large cities. Of all the settlements in the valley only Lahore in present-day Pakistan; Delhi, Kanpur, and Calcutta in India; and Dhaka (formerly spelled Dacca) in Bangladesh have a population of a million or more.

The Deccan Plateau

Stretching south from the Vindhya Hills and covering most of the southern two thirds of the subcontinent is a large plateau called the Deccan. The Western Ghats, a long range of low but rugged peaks, isolates the Deccan from the narrow plain skirting the western coast. A similar range, the Eastern Ghats, separates the plateau from the long coastal plain.

For centuries the mildly rugged borders of the Deccan isolated the region from invaders on all sides. Monarchies in the Deccan were usually able to resist movements of invaders coming from the north and from the Ganges region. But the mountainous terrain and the difficulty of traveling upstream along navigable rivers also kept coastal traders from traveling into the Deccan's interior. As a consequence, few large cities developed in the interior until recent times. Today, the Deccan has Ahmadabad, Poona, Nagpur, and Hyderabad, four of the world's most populous cities.

The Coastal Plains

Running along the sides of the Deccan and joining at the tip of India are narrow fertile strips of heavily settled coastal plain. Rice is grown on the arable land, while the cities of the coastal plains are some of the largest on the subcontinent. Calcutta, the center of trade on the east coast, is the most populous city on the subcontinent. Bombay, the second most populous, is the most important trading center of the west coast. The fourth most populous city, Madras, overcame poor harbor facilities to become the most important port along the eastern coast of the subcontinent's southern tip.

Tillable land in the region is found mainly on the coastal strips. Because most inhabitants in this region live along the coasts and have access to the sea, the region has been a leader in emigration to other countries. Many inhabitants have crossed the 22-mile strait to Sri Lanka or have left the subcontinent for Malaysia, Singapore, other island nations in Southeast Asia, and nations along Africa's east coast.

In modern times Kerala, a province in South India, has become a model for the subcontinent. In a nation where as few as 40 percent of the people are literate, 70 percent of the Keralites can read and write. Because of its skilled work force and the rich mineral deposits of the area, Kerala has a flourishing industrial sector.

The Indus River

Rivers and rainfall have been of vital importance to the subcontinent since the development of civilizations. Three mighty river systems and other smaller rivers drain the subcontinent. The monsoons, the winds that usher in and then end the subcontinent's rainy season, are the subject of much of the region's art, music, and literature. Wherever a traveler goes on the subcontinent, water is an overriding concern.

Since ancient times most of the inhabitants of the northwestern part of the subcontinent have lived in the Indus River Plain, the vast area drained by the Indus River. The river descends in a northwesterly direction from its source in the high Himalayas. The river then turns southwestward near the point where it is fed by five tributaries in an area called the Punjab, a name meaning "five waters." The Indus continues its flow through a desert called the Sind and eventually empties into the Arabian Sea.

The valley of the Indus River was the home of the subcontinent's first civilization, the Harappan. Several thousand years ago the valley was covered with forests and other vegetation. As civilizations developed, settlers slowly upset the rhythm of nature by cutting down forests, uprooting vegetation, and draining marshes and other wetlands. These human changes gradually affected seasonal wind, rainfall, and temperature patterns. Over the centuries the climate changed from wet and humid to dry. Working together, nature and the inhabitants in the area gradually turned much of the region into dust bowls and deserts. During the British occupation of the area, however, an irrigation system was developed and many thousands of miles of irrigation canals were built. These have helped turn the deserts into valuable wheat- and cotton-producing lands.

The Ganges River

As the Harappan civilization declined, the center of population in the subcontinent shifted from the Indus River Valley to the Ganges River Valley. For several thousand years the Ganges Valley has been the focal point of life on the subcontinent. Almost all the great empires in the subcontinent's history have risen and fallen in its floodplain. As a result the valley is famous for its many historic cities, several of which were the capitals of empires.

Through the centuries the difference between food and famine for people in the Ganges Valley has been the Ganges and its four main tributaries. The tributaries begin in snow-crowned mountains to the north, flow through central Hindustan, and join the Ganges before it empties into the Bay of Bengal. The Ganges and its tributaries irrigate thousands of acres of sugar cane and cotton through a network of free-flowing canals. By contrast, farmers in the Indus Valley depend almost exclusively on irrigation pumps to keep water flowing in their canals. Irrigation in the Ganges Valley enables farmers to produce two crops a year, even when the summer monsoon season is delayed or fails to deliver enough moisture. Irrigation also makes possible the cultivation of land where rainfall is scarce.

The Brahmaputra River

The Brahmaputra joins the Ganges in the area now occupied by present-day Bangladesh. The Brahmaputra begins in the northeastern mountains of the subcontinent and flows through one of the rainiest regions on the earth, making its source of water almost inexhaustible. After the Brahmaputra joins with the Ganges, the many **tributaries** of the two rivers then empty into the Bay of Bengal, forming a delta from the rich layers of soil deposited over the centuries. The delta region is an exceptionally good farming area, but no part of the delta, two thirds of which is in Bangladesh, lies more than 150 feet above sea level. Because it is so low-lying, the delta is subject to frequent flooding, especially during the rainy season. While flooding often takes many lives, ruins crops, and kills livestock and other animals, the receding waters leave behind a rich deposit of new soil.

3. The Monsoons:

Monsoons are seasonal winds that occur in several different parts of the world. But no other part of the world is as influenced by the monsoons as South Asia. The summer monsoon period generally begins in June and ends in September.

The summer monsoon period generally begins in June and ends in September. The summer monsoons, which form over the ocean, blow toward the land. The winds pick up tremendous amounts of moisture from the ocean. As the winds reach land, they are forced to rise. Water vapor in the air cools and falls to earth as rain. The summer monsoon rains begin suddenly.

The winter monsoon period reverses the paths of the summer monsoon period, blowing from the land toward the ocean, and has two phases. The first phase is dry and hot. It generally begins in October and ends in March when the second phase takes over. During April and May the temperatures rise higher and higher and the land becomes drier and drier. In parts of the subcontinent temperatures have risen to 115° Fahrenheit, winds have blown with speeds as high as 65 miles an hour, and as much rain as 40 inches has fallen in one day.

Much of South Asia depends on the summer monsoon for its water supply. But the summer monsoon has an unpredictable nature that often causes problems. It may bring too much rain, causing flooding and loss of life and crops. Sometimes the summer monsoon brings insufficient amounts of rainfall to meet South Asian needs. Rivers never fill up and reservoirs stay at dangerously low levels, lowering both agricultural and industrial productivity. About half of the region's hydroelectricity is generated by waterpower from rivers and reservoirs that are fed directly by monsoon rains. The summer monsoon may also come late, delaying the growing season and making life a struggle for the subcontinent's farmers.

Predicting paths, rainmaking capabilities, and the arrival of the monsoons is a gigantic guessing game for people in South Asia. While monsoons can be a great benefit, they can also be a great challenge for South Asians.