

31. The Indian Subcontinent in the 1990's



TEACHER BACKGROUND

While the Indian Subcontinent has great religious and ethnic diversity, all its countries face common problems, including poverty and political instability. They have frequently had disputes with each other.

India has the second largest population of any country on earth, roughly 900 million people. Only China has more. The area of India is 1.3 million square miles (3.3 million square kilometers), roughly equal to the United States east of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. India is a poor country with a per capita gross domestic product of \$288. Per capita domestic production is a measure of relative wealth, or in this case, poverty. The domestic production of a country is defined as the amount produced inside the country. Overseas workers do not count. This GDP is divided by the population of the country to get the per capita GDP. This is the amount that every citizen of India, adult or child, would have if the production were divided evenly. The comparable figure for the United States is roughly \$21,000. About two thirds of India's people still work in agriculture.

India gained its independence from Great Britain in 1947. Mahatma Gandhi had been leading a nonviolent campaign for independence since about 1920. But British India had a minority of Muslims. The British decided to partition India, creating a Hindu India and a Muslim Pakistan. Unfortunately, the two religious groups were so intermingled that no border could easily separate them. When the line was drawn, millions of people moved. Muslims fled from India to Pakistan and Hindus from Pakistan to India. The process was not peaceful;

about 500,000 died. Among them was Gandhi, who was assassinated.

The border was itself a subject of dispute. India and Pakistan have maintained a running dispute over Jammu and Kashmir. This led to fighting in 1947 and 1965. In 1971, Bengali nationalism led the people of East Pakistan to rebel. East Pakistan was separated from West Pakistan by 1000 miles of India. India stalled a bit until the snows made Himalayan passes unusable so China couldn't intervene, and then aided the rebels. So in 1971, Bangladesh became independent. India continues to have serious religious tensions. Its people are more than 80 percent Hindu, but it still has about 11 percent Muslims. Other minority religions often cause problems. In 1984, Indira Gandhi, prime minister, was assassinated by Sikhs, a religious minority. Although India and Pakistan now have diplomatic relations, there is still tension. India has detonated a nuclear device. They say it was not a weapon. Pakistan is reported to have nuclear bomb capacity but has not tested it.

Pakistan is a country about twice the size of California, 310,527 square miles (803,943 square kilometers), with a population of 117 million, 97 percent Muslim. Pakistan is also poor, with a per capita GDP of \$380. Pakistan's government has been unstable and from 1977 to 1985 was under martial law. Pakistan has been on good terms with China since 1950. This is largely because China has had border disputes with India. When the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan, Pakistan was the base for Afghan resistance fighters from 1980-1989. The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and changes in Soviet government have improved relations.

Bangladesh is a country slightly smaller than Wisconsin, 55,813 square miles (143,998 square kilometers). It is one of the poorest places on earth, with a per capita GDP of \$198. About three-fourths of the population farms the alluvial plain. Unfortunately, the monsoon rains are erratic and can produce drought or floods. The population of 116 million is 98 percent Bengali and 83 percent Muslim. Bangladesh has suffered from political instability.

Sri Lanka was a colony of Great Britain and was granted independence in 1948. It is an island about the size of West Virginia, with an area of 25,332 square miles (65,610 square kilometers) and a population of 18.1 million people. In spite of a relatively low per capita GDP of \$600, it has a healthy population with a life expectancy of 73 years and a literacy rate of 98 percent. The government has a strong democratic tradition. One ongoing problem has been the Tamils. About three fourths of Sri Lankans are ethnic Sinhalese, but Tamils are a significant (18 percent) minority. Violence by the Tamils started in 1956 and continued until 1995. India sent peacekeeping forces from 1987 to 1990. The January 1995 settlement may or may not lead to a permanent solution.

Nepal was never a British colony like the above. It is a bit larger than Arkansas, 56,126 square miles (147,181 square kilometers). It is a roughly rectangular country: On the Indian border it is a plain; next, comes a strip of hills; and along the Chinese border are the Himalayas. This is an isolated and very poor country; per capita GDP is \$150. Among Nepal's economic assets are the tourists who come to see and climb the highest mountains in the world. Most Nepalese are farmers (91 percent). The government is a constitutional monarchy. The first election under the latest revision of the constitution was held in 1991.

Afghanistan is a country about the size of Texas (250,965 square miles—650,000 square kilometers) with a population of 16 million. It is landlocked and mountainous, with only 15 percent of its land arable. Consequently, it is very poor, with a \$200 per capita GDP. Afghanistan has been seen largely as the route to somewhere else. In colonial days, the British saw it as a possible Russian invasion route to India through the famous Khyber Pass. In modern times, the Soviet Union sent in troops in 1979 to support a pro-Soviet government. The Soviets saw Afghanistan as an approach to their borders. Afghan resistance was fierce and was aided by the American CIA using bases in Pakistan. Soviet forces withdrew in 1989. A guerilla leader was elected president in 1992, but fighting among various guerilla groups has continued in the country.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, five Soviet republics in this area became new nations. They are Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. These new nations are struggling with the problems of establishing new national governments and reforming their economies after years of operating under the communist economic system.