8.2: Patterns of Human Settlement in South Asia

South Asia’s rich cultural landscape is a product of its varied physical environment and long history of human settlement. Modern humans first settled in this area 75,000 years ago, and early human ancestors likely settled in the region hundreds of thousands of years before that. The first major civilization in South Asia was in the Indus River valley beginning around 3300 BCE. This civilization, located in present-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and northwestern India, relied on the monsoon rains to provide water to the Indus River. Here, early settlers developed systems of urban planning, baked brick houses, and the civilization at its peak numbered over five million people.

By 1800 BCE, however, the Indus Valley civilization began to decline. Weakened monsoon rains likely led to drought conditions and even small changes in precipitation and climate can have a devastating effect on a population of five million. Although residents developed some systems of water supply, they largely depended on the monsoon rains for agriculture, and many began moving to other areas of the region as arid conditions increased.

Around 1500 BCE, the Aryans, an Indo-Iranian group from modern-day Iran, invaded northern India. The Aryans were speakers of Indo-Iranian languages and brought their language, known as Sanskrit, their culture, and their ideas of social order to the South Asian realm. Hinduism and the caste system would both emerge from the Aryan culture.

South Asia was conquered by a number of different empires, each leaving an impact on the cultural landscape. The Maurya Empire stretched across the Himalaya and Karakoram mountain ranges, extending into most of South Asia by 250 BCE followed by a number of different dynasties. In the middle ages, the Islamic Empire extended into Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the 18th century, however, the ruling Islamic Mughal Empire was in decline, leaving a power vacuum that would be exploited by the British. As the Industrial Revolution swept through the United Kingdom, the British were interested in expanding their supply of natural resources. Throughout the mid-18th century and the early 19th century, the British Empire, which had established the British East India Company, took over large stretches of land in India. The British
established tea and cotton plantations, and took control of South Asia’s resources. Although this region had previously established successful trading systems, the British saw local industries as competition and shifted their development to export raw materials. British rule also increased Westernization in South Asia and created an extensive rail transportation system.

As time went on, there were rising demands for independence. Mohandas K. Gandhi, known in India by the title “Mahatma,” was a London-educated lawyer and one of the leaders in India’s struggle for independence. He organized local communities to participate in nonviolent protests and his commitment to nonviolent resistance would inspire later civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr.

Throughout this time, the isolated Himalayan countries of Nepal and Bhutan largely existed as buffer states, caught between the powerful British Empire and China. Their relative isolation allowed them to develop unique cultural features with little influence from outside groups, but as with most buffer states, left them with less economic and industrial development than their more powerful neighbors.

The British eventually agreed to withdraw from India but political and religious differences resulted in a partition of the former British territory in 1947 (Figure 8.3). Areas that were majority Hindu would become the secular state of India. Areas that were majority Muslim would become the new Islamic state of Pakistan. Since Muslims were clustered both in modern-day Pakistan and along the mouth of the Ganges on the coastal Bay of Bengal, the Muslim state of Pakistan would be divided into a Western and an Eastern territory. This prompted large-scale migrations of Hindus and Muslims who were on the “wrong” side at the time of the partition.

![Partition of British India and Migration](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Geography_(Human)/Book%3A_World_Regional_Geography_(Finlayson)/08%3A…)
Not everyone in South Asia supported the partition plan. Gandhi, who had long called for religious unity in the region, was opposed to the concept. Hundreds of thousands of people were killed in violent riots. In 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist who opposed the partition plan and Gandhi’s commitment to nonviolence.

Furthermore, although there were areas that were clearly majority Hindu or majority Muslim, religious minorities existed throughout India and not all regions had an easy transition. At the time of the partition, states were free to decide whether they wanted to join Hindu India or Muslim Pakistan. In the territory of Jammu and Kashmir in Northern India (Figure `\(\PageIndex{2}\)`), Muslims comprised around 75 percent of the population but the maharaja, the Sanskrit term for “great ruler,” was Hindu. The maharaja struggled with the decision, and in the meantime, Muslim rebels, backed by Pakistan, invaded. He then gave the territory to India in exchange for military aid.

Figure `\(\PageIndex{2}\)`: Map of the Disputed Areas of Jammu and Kashmir (Central Intelligence Agency, World FactBook, Public Domain)

Today, Jammu and Kashmir still remains a contentious territory and there have been violent clashes in the past few decades over political control. In the 1950s, China, without the knowledge of India, built a road through the northern portion of the state and was given territory by Pakistan. Although India claims the entire state, it controls the southern half of the state and about four-fifths of its population. Pakistan controls the territory’s northern portion and moved its capital from Karachi to Islamabad to better control its frontiers. East Pakistan, long marginalized and culturally discriminated against by West Pakistan, gained independence as the state of Bangladesh in 1971.

As a region, South Asia is now the most populous area in the world and is home to over 1.8 billion people. Some of the world’s largest megacities are located here as well, including Delhi, India (population of 26 million in the entire metropolitan area), Karachi, Pakistan (population of 14 million, with some estimating that it is much higher) and Mumbai, India (population of over 21 million). Despite the sizeable population, however, the region remains largely rural. Only
around 36 percent of people in Pakistan, 31 percent of people in India, and 28 percent of people in Bangladesh live in cities. These relatively low levels of urbanization indicate that most people in the region still practice agriculture.

Urbanization is increasing, however, as industrialization and development have brought new jobs to the cities. British colonization left the region with the English language which has proven an economic asset, though it has also led to the marginalization of indigenous languages. Foreign companies have increasingly outsourced to India, taking advantage of a large, low-wage and English-speaking labor pool. **Outsourcing** refers to contracting out a portion of a business to another party, which might be located in a different country. Business processing in particular, such as call centers and information technology, has been outsourced and employs significant numbers of people in India. India is also one of the global leaders in fiber production, and textile production remains an important part of Pakistan’s and Bangladesh’s economies as well.

Nepal and Bhutan remain isolated both in terms of physical geography and global economic integration. Political uncertainty has generally hampered economic growth in Nepal but the country has been able to reduce its poverty rate considerably in recent decades. Tourism to Nepal has also increased, though local leaders have expressed concern over mounting issues of trash and pollution as a result of climbers flocking to Mount Everest. In the early 21st century, Bhutan transitioned from an absolute monarchy to a constitutional monarchy and held its first general election. Its government has promoted the measure of gross national happiness (GNH), as opposed to relying strictly on measures of economic or industrial development and has sought sustainable ways to develop and urbanize.

**Buffer states:**

- a country situated between two more powerful states

**Partition:**

- the division of a territory into smaller units, as with the former British Empire in South Asia

**Outsourcing:**

- contracting out a portion of a business to another party, which might be located in a different country