8.5: Future Challenges and Opportunities in South Asia

India's male-skewed population pyramid is indicative of a larger issue of gender inequality in its society. Sexual violence in particular continues to be a significant issue. Although the percentage of women who have been raped in India is lower than in other countries, a majority of rape cases are never reported and even an incidence rate of 8 or 9 percent in a population of over 1 billion people means that tens of millions of women have been victimized. The government of India has taken steps to reform its criminal code so that more criminals are prosecuted but even after a 2013 reform, marital rape continues not to be a crime. In a country that has few female police officers, high rates of domestic violence, and a relatively low status of women, sexual violence will likely remain a problem until these broader, systemic issues are addressed.

Overall, South Asia’s growing population will have a significant impact on its geography. Much of the historic growth in this region was supported by the Green Revolution, which refers to changes in agricultural technology and productivity beginning in India in the 1960s. In 1961, India was at risk of widespread famine when a hybrid rice seed was developed that yielded ten times more rice than traditional seeds. It was called “Miracle Rice” and its use spread throughout Asia. Despite these agricultural advances, South Asia has the highest rates of child malnutrition of any world region. The low status of women in particular contributes to a lack of knowledge about the nutrients that are needed for children. Around one in three children in India are underweight.

Economically, South Asia has experienced rising prosperity yet systemic issues of governance and poverty remain. India in particular has one of the world’s largest economies and the fastest growing economy in the region. This economic growth has mainly been focused on urban centers, drawing large numbers of people from the rural countryside to the cities in hope of finding work. Many cities have been unable to accommodate the rapid migration, however, and the sprawling slums in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are indicative of inadequate infrastructure and economic inequality. Several factories in this region have collapsed in recent years, killing thousands of workers and highlighting the poor working condition of many South Asians.
What does the future hold for South Asia? Although economic growth has reduced poverty in India, down from 60 percent in 1981 to 25 percent in 2011, corruption has increased. Inequality between genders, religious groups, castes, and ethnic groups remains a problem in much of the region. In some cases, this has led to communal conflict, which refers to violence between members of different communities. In Sri Lanka, a majority Buddhist country, ethnicity and religion are closely linked. Buddhists here have shaken the traditional peaceful image of their religion and have engaged in violent conflict with the minority Tamils and Muslims.

Still, local government and community leaders have sought to escape the shadow of the 20th century’s turmoil by embracing new models of development and cooperation. In Bhutan, for example, the government initiative to measure gross national happiness resulted in shifting urban amenities, such as schools and healthcare clinics, to rural areas. This slowed the rural to urban migration that was rapidly occurring in other parts of the realm. Despite political and military turmoil, Pakistan has been able to substantially decrease its poverty rate. South Asia remains a complex realm at the crossroads of modernization and traditional cultural and religious values.

**Green Revolution:**

changes in agricultural technology and productivity beginning in India in the 1960s

**Communal conflict:**

violence between members of different communities