

## *The Environment*

Thou art the ruler of the minds of all people,  
 Thou Dispenser of India's destiny.  
 Thy name rouses the hearts  
 Of the Punjab . . . Gujrat, and Maratha,  
 Of Dravid, Orissa, and Bengal.  
 It echoes in the hills of the Vindhya and Himalayas,  
 Mingles in the music of Jumna and Ganges,  
 And is chanted by the waves of the Indian sea.

FROM RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S

Jana Gana Mana (*"The Mind of the Multitude of the People"*),  
*India's national anthem*



INDIA IS THE WORLD'S MOST ancient civilization, yet one of its youngest nations. Much of the paradox found everywhere in India is a product of her inextricable antiquity and youth. Stability and dynamism, wisdom and folly, abstention and greed, patience and passion compete without end within the universe that is India. Everything is there, usually in magnified form. No extreme of lavish wealth or wretched poverty, no joy or misery, no beauty or horror is too wonderful, or too dreadful, for India. Nor is the passage to India ever an easy one for Western minds. Superficial similarities of language and outward appearances only compound confusion. For nothing is obviously true of India as a whole. Every generalization that follows could be disproved with evidence to the contrary from India itself. Nor is anything "Indian" ever quite as simple as it seems. Each reality is but a facet of India's infinity of experience, a thread drawn from the seamless sari of her history, a glimpse behind the many veils of her *maya* world of illusion.

Persians first used “India” for the land that was east of their ancient empire, through which a mighty river—the Indus—flowed. The country beyond that River Indus came to be known as India. The people who lived there were Indians. In their own earliest works, however, Indians referred to their land as Bharata, which may have been the name of their greatest ancient warrior or tribal chief. India’s longer ancient epic is called *Mahabharata*, “Great Bharata,” the story of warring tribal cousins, whose struggle for power on the plains of Delhi probably occurred around 1000 B.C. Modern India’s Republic officially adopted Bharat as its alternate name when the Constitution of India was enacted on January 26, 1950.

In many ways India is more truly a state of mind than a national body, even as Indic Civilization has endured for more than 4,000 years as an empire of ideas rather than as territorial boundaries. Often nebulous and self-defeating, conflicted and fragmented, the rambling bullock-cart continent called India is at once the oldest and most sorrowful as well as the most youthful and most beautiful civilization on earth. Her very weakness at times has been her greatest strength, since for sheer endurance India is unique. Bowing low before the onslaught of armies and elements, India has survived every invasion, every natural disaster, and every mortal disease and epidemic, the double helix of her genetic code transmitting its unmistakable imprint down four millennia to no less than a billion and a quarter modern bearers. Indians have demonstrated greater cultural stamina than any other people on earth, with the exception of the Chinese. Old as she is, India continues to grow and flourish, transmuting her ancient forms into innovative modernity, adapting her past to suit the present, overcoming death itself by creating such ingenious concepts as reincarnation, yet welcoming individual extinction as the ultimate goal of salvation through release—*moksha*.

Indic Civilization has enriched every art and science known to us. Thanks to India, we reckon from zero to ten with misnamed “Arabic” numerals and use a decimal system without which our modern computer age would hardly be possible. Ancient Indians were the first humans to spin and weave cotton into cloth that continues to provide our most comfortable summer attire. Indians taught us to domesticate and eat chicken, play chess, gamble with dice, love mangoes and elephants, stand on our heads for good health, believe in the coexistence of contradiction, and appreciate the beauty and universal possibility of nonviolence. India is the birthplace of Buddhism as well as Hinduism, motherland of Sikhs and Jains, the abode of more rishis, sadhus, mahatmas, and maharishis and their many cults than is any other place on earth. India is a learning laboratory for linguists, a

museum for ethnographers and anthropologists, a treasure trove for archaeologists, a nightmare for epidemiologists. The average Indian bazaar is more crowded and colorful than most museums the world over. A modern Indian city street is filled with more vitality, color, sound, and smells than any theater or carnival on earth. India pulsates, vibrates, scintillates with such a plethora of human, animal, botanical, insect, and divine life that no camera or recording device, no canvas, pen, or cassette can fully capture the rich design of daily, ordinary existence. Each of her hundreds of thousands of urban and millions of village dramas is enacted free of charge before audiences that never pause to note the beauty or poignant tragedy unfolding itself every day on countless stages under India's tear-filled sky.

Indians are among the world's most sensual yet most austere people. Sex is worshiped as religious ritual in this land that invented monasticism. Copulation in every imaginable form has been carved into stone, immortalized on countless facades and inside the sacred "womb house" of Hindu temples for almost 2,000 years. Yet to celibate sadhus such erotic art is viewed only as a test of their unwavering powers of yogic concentration. Shiva, India's oldest divinity, is still worshiped mostly in phallic form, symbol of his mighty erect lingam, with which he seduced the wives of many thousands of Brahman sages in the epic Pine Forest. The same Shiva is also "Great God" of yogic abstinence, whose powers of concentration were such that he could sit without moving for thousands of years on the skin of the tiger he had stripped with a flick of his smallest fingernail. Another most popular Hindu deity, Krishna, might indeed be called the Father of his country, since he supposedly married no fewer than 16,000 adoring milkmaids, who bore, mythology has it, 160,000 of his divine children! The Mother Goddess is worshiped throughout India by many names, in both benevolent and malevolent forms, but her most popular symbol remains a smooth, round, perforated stone called *yoni*. The Mother is India's soil incarnate, consort of every male divinity, whose powers are inert without the stimulus of her inspiring, beautiful body. That divine power, called *shakti*, is a unique attribute of the female, whose sexual inspiration and creative energy is prerequisite to life. Without her Mother Goddesses, India would never come alive, but thanks to their fecundity her soil teems with children, taught early in life to worship the Mother and divine sexual fire.

Nature is always nearby in India. Sacred cows and lumbering water buffalo often reside in the most spacious front rooms of town houses, and they seem to know quite well precisely where to turn off the street and clamber up a few stairs to the parlor they call home. Birds and lizards of many varieties make

their nests in the beams or rafters and on the walls or ceilings of urban dwellings, cheering their human neighbors with morning and evening raga chirps and performing the vital service of keeping houses they inhabit free of dangerous stinging insects. Households blessed with a cobra family in residence rarely complain, since those regal hooded snakes are considered good luck for childbearing women and rarely attack humans unless startled or threatened. Every Indian child learns early in life never to reach under a tablecloth or into any dark closet, or as a rule anywhere in the house that might have insufficient light to reveal the coiled body of a sleeping cobra. Night guards, who patrol every Indian town, always pound the pavement with their stout lathis and usually shout or sing as well, to warn snakes of every variety of their approach, doubtless warning thieves and other criminals in the process while keeping innocents trying to fall asleep wide awake!

Forest-dwelling yogis learned, long before the first Indian cities were built, of course, that their surest defense against being poisoned or devoured by most crawling, flying, or prowling jungle creatures was to sit so perfectly still that they appeared to be the natural flora, or an outcrop of stone. Some of India's loveliest ancient seals and stone and bronze statues depict snakes or leaf-covered vines wrapped around human arms, legs, or torsos in what must have been quite a familiar sight for many millennia. Not that such equipose was ever easy to attain. Nor has the danger of poisonous snakes been eradicated. Quite the contrary. As population pressures continue to encroach upon dwindling jungle or hitherto unfilled land, India's reptiles appear to be retaliating. Annual estimates of deaths from snakebite are well over 100,000, though that is still much lower than the toll from India's most modern predators, the automobile, bus, truck, and train, whose lethal powers have now escalated to the point where India can claim the sorry distinction of being one of the world's most hazardous nations in which to drive or ride.

Most Indians, however, continue to walk from their village huts to fields they till nearby, and if ever they ride it is usually on a wooden bullock or buffalo cart, whose prototype was built in the third millennium B.C. Such carts are almost as common in big cities as in villages, but the modern urban incarnation generally wears pneumatic rubber tires on its bulky wheels, much to the relief of those who ride. India now produces millions of its own bicycles, the most efficient inexpensive mode of urban middle-class and student transport, and a growing number of motor scooters, motorbikes, and automobiles built in collaboration with Ford and several British, Italian, Japanese, and Czech multinationals. In response to growing concerns

about global warming, Ratan Tata's enlightened corporation has purchased 6,000 French "Smart" cars, which are fueled by pollution-free compressed air and cheap enough for middle-class urban Indians to buy.

Of the more than half a million Indian villages, the most remote of which are still without permanent land links to neighboring towns or cities, most currently receive satellite-transmitted broadcasts from New Delhi, thanks to cooperative U.S. space technology. Modern tools of scientific technology are thus helping India's remote primal cells of diverse rural traditions tune into the mainstream of national goals and aspirations, exponentially accelerating the process of modernized change. Even as India's villagers are brought to American homes by TV news reports—although usually only when dread disaster has struck—or to Washington and New York, thanks to the genius and beauty of a Festival of India or a new production of the *Mahabharata*, the modern world daily intrudes its seductive images of affluence and power into village air, jolting Indian minds from their bullock-cart ruts of antiquity onto swifter and more dangerous highways.

#### THE RIVER

India and the River mirror each other, bubbling with life, always changing, ever the same. Much like India, the River is impossible to grasp in her entirety—most elusive when she appears simplest, deceptively deep even when her surface shines clear. Refreshing cradle of life, the River nonetheless often proves dangerous, especially to strangers. Like India, the River is beautiful but polluted, timelessly enduring yet transient.

India's most fertile northern plains, still the major centers of South Asia's population, are all gifts of great rivers. The Indus, since mid-August 1947 the main artery of Pakistan, is westernmost of the great northern riverine systems and was the cradle of Indic Civilization. Born in mountain abodes of eternal snow and ice, the Indus, like her sister rivers to the east, flows abundantly all year long. Indus water rich in mineral sediment annually journeys some 2,000 miles from Tibet to the Arabian Sea, bearing enough fresh water to cover the state of California a foot deep. Small wonder the Greco-Persians called the Indus a "Lion." For thousands of years fierce Indus floods roared down Himalayan valleys to bury the hapless inhabitants of towns and villages erected too close to its banks. Stronger and more devastating at flood tide than the Nile, the raging Indus remained a terror to its valley folk until relatively recent barrages of concrete and vast storage-tank lakes conspired to tame and divert its floodwaters. Following the Partition of British India

in 1947, India and neighboring Pakistan argued bitterly over what each nation considered its fair share of precious Indus Valley canal waters, without which fecund soil on both sides of the new border would soon turn into desert wasteland. International mediation resolved that vital conflict in 1960, yet each nation periodically accuses the other of siphoning off more water than it merits according to solemn treaty.

Five rivers—*punjab* in Persian—flow like fingers of a giant open hand into the Indus, merging with that main artery as it races toward the sea. The land of those five great rivers is still called Punjab in both Pakistan and India, although since the fateful 1947 Partition only four of the original five flow through Pakistan, while a mere two fructify India. India's Punjab was further divided in 1966, when the country lost its lower eastern half to the Hindu-majority state of Haryana, following years of bitter conflict with Punjabi-majority Sikhs. Despite its much-diminished size, however, thanks in good measure to its fertile soil and abundant resources of hydroelectric power, India's Punjab emerged in the 1970s as one of the wealthiest of India's twenty-five states. The hardworking Sikh majority of that industrially advanced and agriculturally rich Punjab resented sharing their abundance with India's much poorer population elsewhere throughout the republic and insisted on greater autonomy, including control over the lion's share of their state finances. New Delhi's refusal to grant such demands only added fuel to Punjabi Sikh agitation for greater independence. A small group of Sikh extremists called for total national separation from the Indian Union, urging creation of a Sikh "Land of the Pure"—*Khalistan*. Pakistan, also meaning "Land of the Pure," had, after all, been created as a national homeland for most of South Asia's Muslim minority in 1947, so why not grant a similar nation-state to India's Sikhs? India's central government refused to entertain the demand, arguing that with barely 2 percent of the total Indian population, only half of whom lived in Punjab, the Sikhs could never support an independent nation.

"Mother" Ganga (Ganges) is India's most sacred river. Ganga is worshiped as a goddess, and Hindu temples line her northern left bank as she emerges bubbly white and icy cold from the solid rock of Himalayan Rishikesh, racing down past sacred Haridwar, goal of countless Brahman pilgrims, to expand in girth and drop her sediment as she slows to a more matronly pace en route toward Kanpur and Allahabad, home of the Nehrus, independent India's "First Family." At Allahabad the Ganga merges with her sister goddess Yamuna (Jumna), who joins her after sluggishly meandering past Old Delhi's Red Fort (Lal Qila) and Agra, reflecting

the ivory minaret profile of the Taj Mahal beneath her swarthy rippling veil. At thrice holy Allahabad, a third goddess river, Saraswati, invisibly merges with sisters Ganga and Yamuna, all wending their watery way to Varanasi (Benares), holiest of holy cities of Hindu India. Believed by some to be the oldest city on earth, Varanasi is more certainly the most sacred place for any devout Hindu to die in. Varanasi's crowded temples raise their ornate spires of stone like worshiping joined hands and arms stretched in supplication toward the sky, as their well-worn steps (*ghats*) descend below the greenish-brown slime of the river, which has absorbed more ashes of Hindu bodies than any other stretch of water on earth. The pungent smell of sandalwood, compounded with that of charred flesh and marigolds, wafts over Varanasi waters, borne on winds vibrant with mantra prayers, punctuated by the tinkling of Brahman bells and muffled whimpers from scavenger dogs that hover around smouldering pyres, while carrion hawks and kites circle slowly overhead. Ganga water at Varanasi is said to have magic powers, and ailing Hindus from every corner of the subcontinent journey to those bustling ghats for an immersion believed by many sufficient as a cure for any ailment. Devout Hindus not only wash themselves in the bubbling green of Varanasi water but also drink it, and they carry bottles and brass *lothas* of the precious fluid home with them for future use, or to share with relatives too weak to have made the pilgrimage themselves. Visitors are advised to exercise greater caution, however, at Varanasi than almost anywhere else in India. Its reputed healing powers have attracted so many lepers and others afflicted with disease that outbreaks of bubonic plague have been reported there in recent years. Japanese environmental activists have long invested millions of yen, trying, as yet in vain, to purify the most dangerously polluted Ganga waters.

Many other mighty rivers drain India's Himalayan foothills to join Mother Ganga's stately, ever-widening flow toward the east. The greatest of those life-generating arteries are the rivers Ghogra and Gandak, of epic fame, which merge with Ganga herself near the ancient Mauryan capital of Patna. Here, too, River Son moves up to join Ganga from the south, draining rugged highlands of Bihar and Chota Nagpur, whose dark mountains hold the richest stores of Indian iron and coal. East of Patna, Mother Ganga flows another 300 miles to Bengal, where she blends her deep waters with the powerful flow of divine Brahma's "son"—Brahmaputra. This great young riverine hero rises in Tibet close to the source of Indus, racing almost a thousand miles east before veering south and slashing his foamy way through glacial ice east of Lhasa, down India's Arunachal (Dawn's) State,

through troubled Assam and Meghalaya (Abode of Clouds), bordering crowded Bangladesh (Nation of Bengal), where it finally joins the mainstream of Ganga's flow, pouring through 10,000 rivulet mouths into the Bay of Bengal.

The People's Republic of Bangladesh, born in 1971, constituted the eastern half of British Indian Bengal until it became East Pakistan in 1947, following Partition. Although only the size of New York State, Bangladesh, with a population of over 150 million, is one of the most crowded and impoverished nations of the world. Millions of desperate Bangladeshi Muslims have fled across India's borders to cultivate some land for themselves in the virtually unpopulated rugged jungles of Meghalaya, Assam, and their neighboring eastern states of Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland. The indigenous tribal peoples of these states bordering Bangladesh fiercely resent what in several states has become a massive "Muslim invasion" of their lands. Joining forces to organize a Seven (States) United Liberation Army, these northeastern Indian Mizo, Manipur, Naga, and Assamese tribals have launched a violent movement to try to terrify Bangladeshi immigrants into returning to their Muslim homeland.

Unlike the great northern rivers, none of those that cross central and southern India are perennially fed by snow or ice. These rivers depend entirely on scant springs and the bounty of monsoon rains, which fall for one-third of the year at most. The south is, therefore, generally drier and less populous than the northern riverine plains. Unlike China's great canals that link its northern and southern rivers, India has long considered, but as yet never attempted, tapping its perennial waterways for southern fructification. Much of central India's desert wasteland might then be brought to life, and the mostly barren southern states of Maharashtra and Andhra could also be remarkably enriched. Not that so monumental an engineering project could be easily accomplished, although, like China, India has sufficient cheap and—for much of each year—mostly idle peasant labor, to make what would otherwise be an impossible task a potential reality. Futurologists insist that India must plan to launch such a project before the end of this century.

Three major rivers drain central India, flowing from east to west: the Mahi, the Narmada, and the Tapti, all emptying into the Gulf of Cambay. Surat, the port city north of Mumbai (former Bombay) at the mouth of the Tapti, was where British merchants first established themselves in modest trade with Agra's Great Mughals early in the seventeenth century. Mumbai was no more than a series of tiny villages at the time, as were Calcutta (Kolkata) and Madras (Chennai). None of those great port cities, India's



major bustling metropolises of the last century, existed prior to the advent of British rule. The Western Ghats (Steps) form a mountainous spine down peninsular India south of Mumbai, leaving but a narrow and very well-watered rich littoral shelf, whose lower half is the spicy Malabar Coast, facing the Arabian Sea. All the rest of southern India's great river systems flow from west to east. The Mahanadi, literally the "Great River," is the vital artery of Orissa, even as its longer southern neighbor, the Godavari, is for Andhra. Mightiest of all the great southern rivers is the Tungabhadra-Krishna, which rises in the mountains of Mysore and meanders more than 1,000 miles across the heart of India's southern peninsula before pouring itself into the Bay of Bengal north of Chennai. Farther south still, below the former Indo-French capital of Pondicherry, is the long but lazy River Kaveri.

From the dawn of civilization, Indians have settled along their riverbanks, using the rich flow of such water not simply to sustain life but also to assure ample surplus for all those artisans, craftsmen, bureaucrats, and armies removed from direct dependence on the soil, thanks to the river's bounty. Fresh water and fertile sediment conspired to nurture ever-growing populations, north and south, but wherever her great rivers flowed, wide and deep islands of local culture emerged and consolidated. Variations of language and social custom evolved over millennia and centuries around those riverine nuclei of civilized life. Long before the dawn of the Christian era, most Indians of the north spoke one or another dialect or popular language of the Indo-Aryan branch of the great Indo-European language family, whose classical language is Sanskrit, and whose most popular regional form is the central Gangetic plain's Hindi, modern India's national language. By the Christian era, however, throughout the southern third of India's subcontinent—south of the River Godavari, at least—India's populace spoke one of four major variants of the Dravidian language family, quite distinct from Indo-Aryan, and virtually unique to South India as well as to northern Sri Lanka, the neighboring southern island formerly called Ceylon.

Tamil, the classical Dravidian language, is still the mother tongue for more than 70 million South Indians in the state renamed Tamil Nadu (Land of the Tamils), which in British Indian times had been Madras. Deep roots of cultural identity, fostered by a rich body of ancient Tamil literature, including epic poetry, devotional songs, and religious philosophy, have given birth to periodic passionate political outcries for separate "Dravidistan" nationhood since before the dawn of Indian Independence in 1947. The redrawing of India's provincial boundaries a decade later, however, was designed from New Delhi primarily to placate Dravidian demands, carving out

Tamil Nadu for the Tamils, the state of Andhra for Telugu speakers, Karnataka (former Mysore) for the Kanarese, and a Malabar state called Kerala for Dravidians who speak primarily Malayalam. Passionate anti-Hindi sentiment in the south led for several decades to annual burnings of India's flag and Constitution, but Dravidian extremist agitation tapered off during Mrs. Gandhi's last years (1980–1984) in power, owing to her generous economic policy toward the south, and in some measure because of the shifting focus of Tamil extremism to Sri Lanka. The northern third of that island nation, where Hindu Tamils predominate over the countryside majority of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhists, received much more than mere moral support from Tamil Nadu neighbors, many of whom sent money and arms, and helped train growing cadres of Tamil Tigers who have been demanding a separate *Eelam* (independent Tamil nation) since the mid-1970s.

Indians of all ages, regions, and languages love their rivers. Before dawn Hindus go to the nearest river to bathe and pray, ritually washing themselves with water drawn in brass pots or clay dishes, holding their nostrils as they immerse their heads and bodies, bobbing up and down like happy porpoises or frolicking elephants. Every morning washerfolk (*dhobiwale*) flock to India's rivers with heavy bundles of dirty cloth, beating their wash clean against smooth stones before spreading colorful saris and white dhotis out in the sun to dry along riverbanks. Religious festivals lure tens of millions to sacred river cities to dance and pray in tune with the ancient rhythms of the Hindu lunar calendar; during Kumbh Mela at Allahabad many people are crushed, some even killed, in the crowd's push to reach the water at the precise instant astrologically reputed to be most auspicious for good health or long life! The River, like India, waits patiently, mutely watching, accepting folly and wisdom alike. Her bounty, now pure, now polluted, both gives and takes life from her countless children, much the way Mother Ganga was reputed in epic lore to have drowned each of her sons as soon as he was born, until her distracted husband, King Santanu, begged her to desist from what he viewed as a barbaric practice. Ganga agreed and let their last son live, but as punishment for having been pressured to do so, abandoned her poor husband, who never fully appreciated how perfectly divine a wife he had had.

#### HEAT

Heat is the most palpable, all-pervasive element of India's environment. Heat is to India what fog and rain are to England, what hazy sunshine and

smog are to Southern California. From March through early November most of India is hot, much of it sizzling. Indians worship several gods of heat: Vishnu and Surya as sun-gods, Agni as god of fire. Coping with intense heat has probably taught Indians more of their philosophy than they like to admit. They may, indeed, have been the first people to make a virtue of necessity, but would not be the last. A general lack of “action-mindedness” long and often noted by foreign visitors as a common quality among Indians was perhaps India’s first line of defense against heatstroke or sunstroke. Rudyard Kipling to the contrary notwithstanding, even Englishmen acclimatized to India’s noonday sun rarely stepped outside in it, unless they were up in Simla’s salubrious heights or those of some less renowned British hill station. Most Indians, of course, developed natural pigmentation to ward off the worst effects of heat, yet death from sunstroke remains common in India.

Intense heat may have inspired India’s ancient rishis (wise men) to practice yoga meditation, thereby keeping themselves as cool as possible in what would otherwise have been a life-jeopardizing environment. We now recognize that yoga has many useful applications, but slowing the body’s metabolism by sitting still and controlling one’s breath, if not actually reducing the heartbeat, is surely one of the best ways to diminish wear and tear. Divine yogis, such as Lord Shiva, used the single-pointed laserlike heat of their meditation to vaporize demons and other intruders on their peace by focusing a third eye of fire on troublesome objects. Heat is also credited with creation, but the self-generating *tapas* (heat) that ancient hymns of India celebrate for sowing “seeds” of life was more closely related to erotic passion than to solar energy.

Wherever India’s heat is coupled with riverine waters or ample monsoon rains, the abundance of agricultural yields has been uniquely supportive of life. Population densities of well over 1,000 per square mile are thus found in most of the eastern Ganga’s plain as well as in Bengal, and along the narrow Malabar coast, where two—and often three—crops of rice are grown annually. Irrigation canals in the north have greatly expanded double and triple cropping, moreover, allowing India today to support more than four times the population she had at the birth of her Republic in 1950, although at much the same bare margin of rough grain caloric subsistence for most peasants. Owing to expanded irrigation works, the use of chemical fertilizers, newly developed high-yielding seeds, and mechanized agriculture, the growing urban middle class and wealthiest segment of India’s population enjoy a richer, more varied diet than had hitherto been possible. Average

overall Indian yields of most crops remain, however, lower than outputs in Japan, China, Canada, the United States, and most western European nations. The general enervating impact of heat may help account for such poor overall productivity.

South of Delhi an arc of primarily barren desert encompassing most of Rajasthan may be found within a radius of more than 300 miles, and from Allahabad a similar half circle to the south would cover most of Madhya Pradesh, India's rugged, barren "Middle Province." Hindu *Rajputs* (sons of kings), whose royal families dominated these central desert domains for more than a thousand years, appear to have invaded India from Central Asia early in the Christian era, although their astrologers trace their royal lineage to divinities of Sun and Moon. A golden sunburst remains the symbol of the Maharaja of Mewar, whose enchanting capital at Udaipur, built around a lovely artificial lake nestled in a natural fortress of hills, was never conquered even by the mightiest of Great Mughals. The brilliantly beautiful colors worn by Rajasthani peasants, whose scarlet and saffron turbans and mirror-shimmering skirts and vests are among the brightest costumes in all of India, seem designed to offset the drab grays and mauves of nature's garb, even as the peacocks and green parrots of Rajasthan are among India's loveliest birds. Rajasthani bands of wandering musicians, dancers, and fortunetellers, known to history as "Gypsies" because they stopped for so many years in Egypt en route to Romania, have added color to most of the world by now. Romani, the Gypsy language, is closest to Rajasthani, a modern Indo-Aryan tongue descended from Sanskrit and related to Hindi. With so little moisture and such intense heat, Rajasthan has never been able to support its population more than marginally, and it remains one of India's poorest states, with the nation's lowest literacy rate, especially among women. Poverty has, however, never diminished the artistry or high spirits of Rajasthan's populace.

When India learns to harness its solar energy economically, the desert states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh will become valuable centers of power generation and transmission. Even as oil reserves have catapulted Arabia to affluence, so solar power might launch central India into an age of rich growth and development, especially were it used to help tap Mother Ganga's perennial flow. India's major liability may then become her greatest asset.

#### MONSOON RAINS

India's rainy "season"—*monsoon*—usually starts early in June and ends late in September. When the monsoon is on time, giant rain-fattened turbanlike

clouds roll toward the elephant trunk profile of the peninsula's western littoral in the first week in June. Without monsoon rains the entire southern peninsula would be as dry as the desert of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. As June's summer sun heats India's land mass more quickly than it does the surrounding waters of the Indian Ocean, continental air rises and moisture-laden ocean air blows toward the land from the southwest. Everywhere in India the monsoon is welcomed with joyous song and dance. Ancient Brahmans kept a weather eye on the dark clouds that annually gathered to the southwest, noting precisely when they reached the coast and rose over the Western Ghat mountains to drop their bounty of life-giving rain. The Soma altar was thus designed and slowly constructed each year to be ready to light a few days before the monsoon started, so that it would seem as if Brahmanic mantras and sacrificial offerings brought the rain. Peasants timed their plowing and sowing accordingly. If the rains came too early, of course, Brahmans lost credibility, and precious water was wasted on furrows devoid of seed. If the rains came late, then crows and other scavengers reaped the only harvest, leaving Brahmans to chant and offer up Soma and *ghi* (or *ghee*, clarified butter) to sacrificial fires in vain, while the prospect of grim famine loomed blacker than clouds on every horizon.

India's still heavily agricultural economy has often been called a "gamble in rains," since the monsoon third of every year is when tanks and reservoirs, as well as most rivers and irrigation canals throughout the land, are given fresh sustenance that must last them until the next monsoon begins. Bumper harvests in recent decades have finally given India sufficient surplus stocks of grain to avert the sort of famine disasters that decimated the land in the last decade of the nineteenth century and as recently as the terrible Bengal Famine of 1943, which claimed over 3 million lives. Monsoon failures sometimes come in two or three successive years, however, and government surplus storage supplies must then provide buffers against famine catastrophe. India's population of more than half a billion peasants remains pathetically vulnerable to whims of nature and winds of change.

The Malabar Coast, south of Goa, with its bounty of about 100 inches of rain during those turbulent monsoon months, has India's most beautiful beaches, palm-fringed and dotted with lagoons, surrounded by banana and mango groves, pepper trees, and cloves, with tea and coffee plantations thriving at higher elevations on the Ghats. It was these lush and lovely beaches that Portuguese merchant seamen in the vanguard of Western Europe's many waves of imperial assault upon India first sighted. Hardly surprising that they found India too enticing, too enriching, to leave alone.

Her natural fruits were too delicious, the beauties of her women too intoxicating, and the allure of India's wealthy variety of produce, finer arts, and ingenious crafts all conspired to seduce visitors from afar. Malabar, the modern state of Kerala, is the one region of India in which matriarchy survived until modern times, reflecting perhaps the earliest pattern of Dravidian society, where the Mother dominated and determined all important aspects of life and behavior. Much later, male-dominated Indo-Aryan tribes and clans invaded India from the northwest, establishing their patriarchal patterns of marriage and inheritance over the northern river valleys and extending them gradually to the rest of the subcontinent.

Monsoon rain clouds rise so rapidly over the Western Ghats that they lose most of their moisture before blowing east across the heartland of the southern peninsula. The western half of that landmass is the Deccan (Southland), most of which is now part of the state of Maharashtra, literally "Great Country," whose booming capital is Mumbai. The serrated lava trap of the dry and dusty Deccan gives it much the same appearance as the badlands of the American Southwest. Most Marathi-speaking peoples of Maharashtra are as tough and undemonstrative as the soil they labor so hard to till. The old Deccan capital of Pune (Poona), approximately ninety miles east of Mumbai, was for centuries a bastion of indigenous Maratha power and traditional Hindu learning as well as a cradle of modern India's Nationalist movement. It remains an important center of higher education and has recently become one of India's major modern industrial and chemical centers—and home of the Indian Officers' basic training National Defense Academy. The region that produced so many generations of British "Poona colonels" thus continues to train their Indian incarnations in somewhat altered leadership molds, yet with much the same meticulous interest in snappy swagger sticks, waxed mustaches and boots, and buckles and belts that shine thanks to ample spit, polish, and elbow grease.

Andhra, the eastern half of the upper peninsular, named for one of India's most ancient dynasties, was carved out of the predominantly Telugu-speaking districts of the Dravidian South. Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra, was hereditary domain of the Muslim Nizams of that city of slums, palaces, and mosques since the early eighteenth century. Although the Nizams were long fabled for their fortune in jewels, elephants, and motorcars, most of Andhra's people remain peasants and fisherfolk who have long supplemented marginal livings netted from grudging seas with cotton spinning and weaving. Hyderabad's brightest young men and women today, however, rival those of neighboring Bangalore at well-paid outsourcing

work in air-cooled offices. Much like Maharashtra, Andhra receives precious little monsoon rain, but its littoral on the Bay of Bengal provides fertile rice land, where several of the major peninsular rivers deposit sediment as they pour into the sea. The state of Orissa just north of Andhra along the coast is also quite depressed and often falls victim to natural disasters, including hurricanes born in the Bay of Bengal. Some of Hindu India's greatest temple architecture and art is found there, however, at Bhubaneshwar and the beautiful coastal village of Puri.

South of Maharashtra and Andhra are the two most populous and wealthy Dravidian states, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Bangalore, capital of Kanarese-speaking Karnataka, is India's fastest-growing urban industrial and global outsourcing electronic center and also home of South India's Air Academy. Formerly famed for its quiet and pleasant English gardens, Bangalore is rapidly becoming more famous for its traffic jams and smog. Not too distant Mysore, however, home of the ex-maharaja for whom an entire kingdom was once named, retains much of its storybook princely charm, with a sumptuous summer palace on a suburban hill that has been converted into a grand hotel. The once seemingly inexhaustible Kolar gold fields of Karnataka helped cover the domes of its maharaja's many palaces and the shining towers of South India's Hindu temples with laminated layers of never-fading magnificence. The icons, doors, and sacred vessels of solid gold stored in South Indian temples, mosques, and palaces alone would probably suffice to sustain India's economy for years. Most of the vast hoard of jewels and precious metals accumulated in the north has long since been looted by foreign invaders, primarily Persian, Turkish, Mongol, Afghan, and British. The south, however, thanks to the deep desert wasteland and rugged Vindhya and Satpura mountain belts that block easy access from the northern plains to the Deccan, has remained relatively unplundered. Hindu temples continue to receive generous donations, never reported, rarely counted by their Brahman guardians who have always enjoyed tax-free autonomy over the lands and wealth within their often high and ample walls, where the gods themselves are believed to reside in appropriate splendor and comfort. Could the frozen assets of those gods somehow be invested on behalf of the submarginal millions of India's most impoverished population, the miraculous goal of Mahatma Gandhi's dream of the "Uplift of All" (*Sarvodaya*) might, indeed, be achieved within a single generation.

A narrower arm of India's southwest monsoon whips around the southern tip of Tamil Nadu, up the Bay of Bengal to the mouths of the Ganga

and her fertile delta. Those winds sometimes come up the bay's natural funnel with hurricane force, lashing tidal waves of terror and destruction, which periodically drown from 10,000 to half a million Bengalis in a single day. Population pressures continue to drive the poorest peasants to the most vulnerable sea-level islands, which are often without communication links to the mainland; hence their inhabitants receive no advance warning of such impending catastrophes, despite modern satellite monitoring of monsoon winds or tsunami waves. The well-watered riverine plains of Bengal are doubly drenched by monsoon rains that rise against Burmese, Himalayan, and Bhutanese mountain walls, dropping as much as 800 inches of rain on some Assamese hill stations, which rarely see sun or sky for weeks on end.

Deflected by the world's highest mountains, monsoon clouds veer west up the Ganga valley to Bihar, the Ruhr of India, and Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), its rural heartland, then from there on to New Delhi, which receives some 85 percent of its annual twenty-five inches of rain during the monsoon third of each year. Modern India's global capital, whose huge urban plain, much like Los Angeles, continues to attract as a giant magnet more millions to its over 15 million population, would be a desert wasteland without its monsoon quota. Thousands of tanks and plaster-lined wells are filled during the rains, allowing Delhi's populace to reap rich orange, tangerine, sugarcane, and sesame crops, as well as vital vegetables and wheat. The site of at least seven and perhaps as many as ten capitals of India, since the dawn of her Civilization, Delhi's plain is replete with sandstone ruins of antiquity that attest both to the evanescence of power and the persistence of imperial ambitions. No other patch of Indian soil has witnessed so much pageantry or pain, heard so many pretentious promises, or hosted as much tyranny and treachery. To the monsoon, however, Delhi is almost the end of the windy line, where clouds are relieved of all but the last of their burdensome moisture before the end of September.

#### MOUNTAIN WALLS

A valance of mighty mountains hangs over South Asia, India's shield against the icy blasts of Siberian frost and the biting yellow sands of Central Asia. India's northern mountain wall is called Himalaya—Abode of Snow—an awesome arc of stone and ice some 1,500 miles long and 200 miles in width, capped by no less than fifty peaks over five miles high. The Himalayas are the world's youngest and tallest mountains. They appear to have sprung up



about 60 million years ago, when the far more ancient granite of India's pre-Cambrian shifting peninsula rammed itself against the then submerged edge of southern Tibet. South India seems to have broken away from East Africa as earth's crust cooled, and then fused itself, following continental drift north, to Asia's littoral, snapping the Himalayas aloft to spectacular heights in that passionate embrace. The much tougher old rock of the drifting peninsula buckled up as well when that continental fusion occurred, but the resulting Vindhya and Satpura ranges of central India rose merely from 3,000 to 5,000 feet above sea level.

Hindu epic myth has its own explanation of Vindhya's humble stature compared to Himalayan Mt. Kailasa (or Mt. Meru), the abode of India's gods. There was supposedly a time when Vindhya grew so "big with pride" that he blocked the very sun's rays from reaching Kailasa's pantheon of divine inhabitants. Several gods shivered with rage and deputed a messenger, the Brahman sage Agastya, to deal with the upstart. Vindhya was Agastya's student, and when his guru approached he bowed low, as a proper Hindu student should. "Stay that way, Vindhya, till I return!" Agastya ordered. But the old Brahman never went back to his northern home, spending his remaining years in the deep south. Thus brash Vindhya was tricked into behaving with proper deference to the gods. Agastya may have been one of the first Aryans to forge across the central mountain ranges to colonize—or what Aryans came to call civilize—the wilds of India's southern domain, whose indigenous Dravidians considered themselves more advanced than any northerners. Indo-Aryans, in any event, like their Greco-Roman cousins, put their gods atop the highest mountains, whether named Olympus or Kailasa. The Himalayas have in consequence long enjoyed a place of special reverence among Indians.

Without her Himalayan wall, North India would have none of her fertile plains, for the beds of detritus and rich sediment that fill the Indus Valley and Punjab and extend many thousands of feet below the fertile surface of Ganga's vast plain are gifts of Himalayan stone ground to sand by rushing waters of melted Himalayan snow. Mineral wealth of every variety, including vast quantities of gold, have poured down from "Father Himalaya's" silvery walls and given credence to many fabled tales of India reported by Herodotus and other Western patriarchs of history. Herodotus wrote of India's "gold-digging ants," who filled their bags with golden "dust" and ran so "swiftly" that only "she-camels" who had recently "dropped their young" could catch them! Thanks to Herodotus's proclivity to report everything he heard, however, we do get our earliest written corroboration

of Indian cotton—or, as Herodotus recounted it, “trees” in India bearing “wool.” He also noted “many tribes” in that most remote and “wealthiest” of Persian imperial satraps, each of whom spoke “different languages.” Several centuries later, Alexander the Great found the Punjab divided into at least as many principalities as there were rivers, and in some measure it was thanks not only to the different languages, but to the indifference of neighboring Indian monarchs to the security of one another’s domain that the mighty Macedonian conqueror marched across all of them, defeating each, one at a time. Were it not for his own army’s “rebellion,” which was in fact a “sit-down strike” on the banks of the Beas River, Alexander might have become India’s first true emperor.

Similar Indian lack of interest in political unification—or perhaps it is, rather, Indian suspicion and mistrust of neighboring strangers, no matter how close they may actually be compared to other foreigners—has left India vulnerable to conquest throughout her long history. To this day, in fact, bonds of national unity are much less powerful for the overwhelming majority of Indians than those of familial, caste, local and provincial, or linguistic-regional ties. In an era of global history, however, that weakness may turn into one of the greatest strengths Indians have, since it usually predisposes them to feel very much at home wherever they wander, as long as they have intimate members of their own family or caste or local community somewhere close at hand. More than 20 million Indians live abroad today, over 2.5 million residing in the United States, where they are the best-educated and wealthiest recent immigrant community to our country. Whether among India’s diaspora community or at home, there has never been any simple “Indian mind” or “Indian response” to external threats or, for that matter, to internal policies proposing change.

India’s northern mountain wall serves as a watershed and natural boundary separating India from China. In most respects Indic and Sinitic Civilizations are as remote from each other as are either of these two grandparents of all other Asian cultures from Western Civilization. Pan-Asian movements based on the unifying force of nonviolent Buddhism or the strength of sentimental ties generated by more recent anti-Western national struggles against imperial powers have never long managed to overcome the deeper cultural differences and political conflicts that continue to divide India from China. In recent decades those differences have led to brief violent skirmishes and unending cartographic disputes over their common border. As these two most populous nations on earth continue to modernize and develop, moreover, their natural competition for control of the rich

resources and peoples who inhabit the major intermontane Himalayan basins of Kashmir, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and India's northeasternmost state of Arunachal Pradesh seems destined to intensify.

India's northernmost state of Jammu and Kashmir remains a thorn in her relations with Pakistan, the most incendiary legacy of the deep-rooted Hindu-Muslim conflict that led to the 1947 Partition of South Asia but has not, unfortunately, been dissolved by that traumatic upheaval. The de facto battlefield partition of Kashmir has, for example, never really been accepted by or satisfied either neighboring nation, and Pakistan's close ties with China are often viewed from New Delhi as posing a potential pincer's threat against the Kashmiri jewel in the crown of the Indian Union. Most Kashmiris in the coveted Vale are Muslims, and many of the indigenous folk who live in the state's more remote northeastern wing of Ladakh are Sino-Tibetan in ethnicity as well as language. New Delhi has secured the state by basing India's most powerful permanent military force based in and around Srinagar and along the never fully quiescent border with Pakistan's Azad (Free) Kashmir territory. The natural beauty and placidity of Srinagar's Lake Dal, with its sumptuous houseboat accommodations and heavenly backdrops of snow-white mountains, are rarely disturbed by such geopolitical problems. China's determination to maintain a road across Ladakh's Aksai Chin (White Stone) alkaline desert, however, led to the first exchange of fire between Asia's two competing superpowers in the late 1950s, bringing an end to what had hitherto been a fragile era of "Indo-Chinese Brotherhood."

The Hindu kingdom of Nepal spans most of the central arc between Tibet and India's U.P. and Bihar states. From his Kathmandu capital, the former king of Nepal, together with his ministers, maintained until 2008 the kingdom's buffer-state independence as a remarkably sturdy "root between two stones." Nepal's Hindu royal family, which claimed descent from the Sun through Udaipur's line, and their Brahman ministers ruled over a predominantly Tibeto-Mongol populace of hearty martial Gurkhas and peasant Newars. They look more Chinese than Indian, as does the pagoda-style architecture found everywhere in the valley, although their Nepali language is derived primarily from Sanskrit. Mother India has retained close diplomatic as well as cultural ties to Nepal, whereas China from the far side of Everest's peak has remained more aloof, perhaps thus inadvertently attracting Nepal's rulers by giving them a greater sense of political and economic independence. At least eighteen yak passes link Nepal to Tibet, however, two of which are major arteries of trade that could easily become military highways

should Beijing so desire. Until quite recently, Nepal has deliberately kept itself a backward hermit kingdom, sensing, no doubt, that the isolation it thereby enjoyed was the surest defense of its much cherished freedoms. Modernity with all its latest forms of terrorist violence and stress as well as technological comfort and pleasure is rapidly encroaching, however, as each jet load from New Delhi, Lucknow, and Patna flies over Himalayan foothills into Kathmandu. The hijacking of an Air India jet by Pakistani terrorists in Nepal in 2005 almost triggered another Indo-Pak war.

The largest natural pass from India to Tibet wends its way through thimble-sized Sikkim, second tiniest of India's states, less than 3,000 square miles with under a million people, some of them indigenous Lepchas, but most Nepalese and Tibetan in origin. Wedged between Nepal and Bhutan, the kingdom of Sikkim retained quasi-independent status until 1975, when the state of Sikkim was fully integrated into India's Union. The vital trade route from Sikkim's mile-high capital of Gangtok to Tibetan Gyantse has made that strategic state too important to modern India's first line of northern defense to leave it in the hands of a royal house whose allegiance to New Delhi had never been enthusiastic. With an elected Congress government, however, all the difficulties of representative rule in any pluralistic tribal society have come to Sikkim, bringing long intervals of autocratic "Governor's rule"—New Delhi martial law—to the Himalayan thimble that must obviously be prepared to withstand any sting of advancing Chinese needles. Thanks to American high-altitude armor and radar equipment, flown to India in response to the Chinese invasion of 1962, Sikkim and its mighty mountains, whose highest peak is Kanchenjunga, now bristle with modern weapons of war and Indian soldiers trained to use them.

The "Dragon Kingdom" of Bhutan (End of Tibet), east of Sikkim, is the last of the world's Mahayana Buddhist monarchies, which once included China as well as Tibet and Sikkim. Slightly larger than Switzerland, Bhutan, with its 2 million people, mostly Tibetan in origin, is now closely linked to India by modern roads as well as the most advanced units of the Indian Army. Indian engineers have been careful to build no highways north of Bhutan's midsection, however, not wishing to expedite the possible advance of any Chinese force south from Tibet. Under Indian tutelage and foreign policy direction, Bhutan has changed quite rapidly and continues to take lengthy strides toward modernity, with the economic potential of its enormous hydroelectric power and rich resources of Sal and Teak forests, as well as incalculable mineral wealth, ripe for development by joint Indo-Bhutanese enterprise.

“Dawn’s Province,” Arunachal Pradesh, is the eastern anchor of India’s northern tier wall of glacial ice and bristles with modern martial power. Bordering Burma as well as China and Tibet, Arunachal is much like Kashmir, at least in strategic terms, if not in communal configuration. With its mostly Tibeto-Burman Buddhist populace, however, Arunachal has much the same feelings of foreignness from most of India as do its immediate neighboring states among the now turbulent northeastern “Seven.” Few, if any, Bangladeshi immigrants have ventured as far north as Arunachal, nor is it very likely that they would survive the frost of that glacial province’s winter months. However, ethnic, linguistic, and religious proximity to Burma and Tibet, as well as to China, keep this region spinning with centrifugal alienation from New Delhi. To the youthful Himalayas and Arunachal’s ancient indigenous peoples, politics and diplomacy are generally far less worrisome than tectonic quakes, avalanches, floods, frost, and famine. Faced with so many daily challenges to survival, these sturdy, usually cheerful mountain folk worry more about the earth opening beneath their feet, or the sky falling, than distant thunder out of Delhi or Beijing.

Father Himalaya’s ice palaces were the goal of Hindu kings and heroes such as Yuddhistira of epic fame, eldest of the noble Pandavas, who persisted in climbing the empyreal heights until Lord Indra himself opened the golden gates to welcome him to his heavenly respite. Yuddhistira’s faithful dog alone had persevered with him to the end of that arduous trail, and when Indra tried to dissuade the valiant monarch from bringing his dog into the palace of the gods, the good king replied, “The dog and I are together!” His loyalty was then rewarded, the dog transformed into divine *Dharma*, god of religion or law, and Yuddhistira, to this day revered as *Dharma-Raja*, king of religion or law, was invited by Indra, King of the Gods, to join Kailasa’s pantheon.

MAP (TK)