3.5: What is India? The Geography of South Asia

India’s dynamic history, then, alternated between periods when the subcontinent was partially unified by empires and periods when it was composed of a shifting mosaic of regional states. This history was also impacted by influxes of migrants and invaders. In thinking about the reasons for these patterns, historians highlight the size of India and its diverse geography and peoples.

It is important to remember that “India” can mean different things. Today, India usually designates the nation-state of India (see Map \(\PageIndex{1}\)). But modern India only formed in 1947 and includes much less territory than India did in ancient times. As a term, India was first invented by the ancient Greeks to refer to the Indus River and the lands and people beyond it. When used in this sense, India also includes today’s nation of Pakistan. In fact, for the purpose of studying earlier history, India can be thought of as the territory that includes at least seven countries today: India, Pakistan, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. This territory is also referred to as South Asia or the Indian subcontinent.

The Indian subcontinent is where Indian civilization took shape. But that civilization was not created by one people, race, or ethnic group, and it doesn’t make sense to see India’s history as the history of one Indian people. Rather, the history of this region was shaped by a multitude of ethnic groups who spoke many different languages and lived and moved about on a diverse terrain suited to many different kinds of livelihood.

Large natural boundaries define the subcontinent. Mountain ranges ring the north, and bodies of water surround the rest. To the east lies the Bay of Bengal, to the south the Indian Ocean, and to the west the Arabian Sea. The largest mountain range is the Himalaya, which defines India’s northern and northeastern boundary. A subrange of the Himalaya—the Hindu Kush—sits at its western end, while a ridge running from north to south defines the eastern end, dividing India from China and mainland Southeast Asia. To the northwest, the Suleiman Range and Kirthar Range complete what might seem like impassable barriers. Yet, these ranges are punctuated by a few narrow passes that
connect India to Central Asia and West Asia.

To the south of the mountain ranges lie the **Indo-Gangetic Plain** and the two great rivers of northern India that comprise it: the Indus River and the **Ganges River**. These rivers originate in the Himalaya and are regularly fed by snow melt and monsoon rains. The Indus River, which is located in the northwest and drains into the Arabian Sea, can be divided into an upper and lower region. The region comprising the upper Indus and its many tributary rivers is called the **Punjab**, while the region surrounding the lower Indus is referred to as the **Sindh**. The Ganges River begins in the western Himalaya and flows southeast across northern India before draining into the Bay of Bengal. Because they could support large populations, the plains surrounding these river systems served as the heartland for India’s first major states and empires.

Peninsular India is also an important part of the story because over time great regional kingdoms will also emerge in the south. The peninsula is divided from northern India by the Vindhya Mountains, to the south of which lies the **Deccan Plateau**. This arid plateau is bordered by two coastal ranges— the Western Ghats and Eastern Ghats, beyond which are narrow coastal plains, the **Malabar Coast** and the **Coromandel Coast**. This nearly 4600 miles of coastline is important to India’s history because it linked fishing and trading communities to the Indian Ocean and, therefore, the rest of Afro-Eurasia. **Sri Lanka** is an island located about thirty kilometers southeast of the southernmost tip of India, and also served as an important conduit for trade and cultural contacts beyond India.