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Ancient India is one of the first four great civilizations of the world. It began about 4,500 years ago sometime in 2,500 B. C. It covered a larger area than the other three great civilizations. More commonly known as the Indus Valley Civilization, ancient India has an expanse of around 1,600 kilometers. It has farming villages, seaports, trading ports and huge towns such as those of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Diggings reveal well-planned communities of two-story and three-story brick buildings, drainage systems, a large public bath and large grain warehouses. It had a system of weights, measures, writing, and evidence of trade with Mesopotamia, Central Asia and Persia. By 1700 B. C., the Indus Valley Civilization disappeared. Evidence suggests that natural disasters in the form of prolonged floods and changes in river courses severely weakened it. As a result, it was probably unable to defend itself from raiders coming from the western and northern hills of the Indian sub-continent (Dales).

Two hundred years later at around 1500 B. C., a series of major invasions from a warrior race, the Aryans, came. The Aryans entered through the mountain passes of Afghanistan from the great plains of central Asia and the Iranian plateau. With the invasion, many Dravidians—ancient Indians, left the fertile northern plains and took refuge in southern India's huge plateau, the Deccan. Meanwhile, the primitive tribes that lived there fled to the hills and jungles to escape the Dravidians (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

The Aryans never conquered southern India though. However, they became the ancestors of many present-day Indians. They evolved the Sanskrit language and a way of writing it. They also created social barriers against the Dravidians, whom they considered inferior. This ultimately led to the

caste system. No cities, burials, arts, or crafts remain of the Aryans except for the Vedas, a religious text which is passed on orally from one generation to another. Consequently, the Vedas and the caste system became major aspects of Hinduism. With Hinduism, the Aryans dominated India for more than a thousand years and their influence gradually spread all over the sub-continent (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

During this time, Siddhartha Gautama (563?-483?) founded Buddhism as an alternative religion. Jainism was also founded at about the same time. Both new religions challenged the Hindu caste system (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

In 326 B. C. Alexander the Great invaded an India with many small, fragmented kingdoms. He eventually controlled the northwestern region. Due to the huge land and homesickness, Alexander and his armies left in 325 B. C. They were never defeated in war (AXN Travel Network Corp.) However, Alexander's generals that remained as governors of the conquered territories were soon forced out by Indian armies. A few that remained became officials of various Indian kings (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Shortly after Alexander's invasion, Chandragupta Maurya (?-298? B. C.), united almost all of India and part of Central Asia. He began the Maurya Empire in which his grandson, Asoka (?-232? B. C.), became its most famous emperor. Asoka conquered many neighboring tribes, converted himself from Hinduism to Buddhism, and helped spread Buddhism all over India and other countries in 200 B. C. (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Other minor invaders, kingdoms and the Gupta dynasty flourished from 120 A. D. to 500 in various parts of India. The Gupta dynasty controlled northern India and parts of Afghanistan. The Gupta dynasty is also considered as the classic period of ancient India marking the rebirth of Sanskrit culture. Many disciplines flourished like architecture, sculpture, painting, dance and music. Meanwhile, the Andhras, Pallavas, and other Hindu-Buddhist dynasties controlled the south (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

From A. D. 450 until the 1400, several major invaders occupied certain parts of India. First, the Huns, then the Muslims from Arabia, followed by Persia and Afghanistan came into the subcontinent. In A. D. 711, Islam came in the form of raids, annexing the Sind area to the Arab caliphate. Arab traders also converted many Hindus in port cities and coastal towns. The Arabs adapted Indian mathematics, astronomy, and other natural sciences. This led to the invention of the Hindu-Arabic numeral system (AXN Travel Network).

However, Muslim converts consisting of Turks, Afghans, Persians, and Mongols rather than Arabs, are credited for the major invasions that caused the extensive spread of Islam in India. Eventually many low-caste Hindus and Buddhists converted to the Muslim faith, where they gained better social status and protection by the strong Muslim armies. With these, Delhi became a sultanate in 1206 (AXN Travel Network).

Mongols too under Tamerlane raided India and captured Delhi in 1398. In 1526, the Mongols, better known as Moguls, established a glorious empire through Babar (1483-1530), also a Muslim. One of its emperors, Akbar, (1556-1605) created an administration that served as basis of many present-

day Indian practices. Akbar's grandson, Shah Jahan, built the Taj Mahal and extended the empire to the Deccan plateau. After the death of Aurangzeb, Shah Jahan's son and successor, the Mogul empire became weak. It gradually contracted until 1858 with the last Mogul ruler in Delhi (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

In search of spices, European nations explored and established trading posts in the coasts of India. Vasco da Gama, a Portugese, reached Calicut in 1498. An alliance of English, Dutch and French traders fought the Portugese for control of the rich spice trade. The alliance eventually won and later on the English, Dutch and French fought each other (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

The British East India Company finally dominated India by the mid-1700s through a strategy of divide-and-conquer. Maratha tribesmen won control of central and western India shortly after Aurangzeb's death. At about the same time, Persia raided northern India. The Sikhs also founded their own kingdom. With this opportunity, the British East India Company played Indian princes against each other. It also waged several wars with those who refused to cooperate. By 1857, using Indian and British troops, the company waged wars in Afghanistan, Burma and Nepal to gain more territory (Crane, Karan and Lamb). The company became rich with its tea (Kushner) and opium plantations (Farndon 48) in the sub-continent and neighboring areas. These made Great Britain a major industrial power.

In the course of the company's wars, Hindu and Muslim Indian soldiers, called Sepoys, resented orders to bite open cartridges greased with cow or pork fat. Hindus consider the cow sacred while Muslims consider pork

unclean. Hence, the Sepoys started a short-lived rebellion in 1857 which was eventually suppressed. Due to this, the British Government took over the control of India from the British East India Company in 1858. Under British rule and perhaps partly due to the Sepoy Rebellion, Muslims and Hindus continuously pushed for independence (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Hindus organized the Indian National Congress in 1885 while the Muslims established the Muslim League for this purpose. After a series of sporadic violence which climaxed with the Amritsar Massacre, the British slowly gave powers back to the Indians but never completely until Mohamdas Karamchand Gandhi became India's greatest leader. With his non-violent disobedience movement, Gandhi finally won Indian independence in 1947 (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

However, the Muslims broke away with a country of their own, Pakistan. Five months later, Gandhi was assassinated by a member of a high Hindu caste for Gandhi's tolerance of the Muslims and his love for the lower castes. Hindu-Muslim conflicts have frequently erupted since then in-country and around Indian borders. In 1971, Muslim civil war in Pakistan led to the establishment of another country, Bangladesh. Thus, Modern India now consists of three countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Cultural Distinctions

The Indian people belong to all the major racial groups. They consist of Indo-Aryans which also includes the Dravidians and various tribes such as Bhils,

Nagas, Santals, and Todas including Mongoloid tribes, Negroid pygmies, and Australoid tribes. Indians speak 180 languages, 14 of which are major, plus more than 700 dialects. The official language is Hindi which has two alphabets: Hindi and Urdu (Crane, Karan and Lamb). India's many cultural distinctions can be attributed to diverse languages as well as varied religious differences. In Modern India, William Elroy Curtis illustrates this more clearly through a 1901 statistic (See Table 1, Appendix A) representing India's population of 294 Million:

...The British Bible Society has published the whole or parts of the Holy Scriptures in forty-two languages which reach 220, 000, 000 people, but leave 74, 000, 000 without the Holy Word...the variety of the people of India may be... [seen in] ...each of the tribes' and clans'... own distinct organization and individuality... ...each is practically a separate nation (Chapter 4).

Moreover, the 1901 Indian population is also substantially distributed according to religion (See Table 2 Appendix A).

Hindus, the most dominant in terms of language and religion, are divided into some 3, 000 social classes or castes. The castes are based on regions, birth places and occupations. As new jobs arise, new castes also gradually develop (Crane, Karan and Lamb). The term ' caste' was used by the British to categorize various Indian communities for efficient rule. India has high castes and low castes. High castes represent the elite of Indian society such as Brahmans who are mostly doctors, engineers, lawyers and who work with professional specialties requiring high educational attainments (Daniel).

Meanwhile, the Lower Castes are further classified into three categories: (1) Scheduled Castes; (2) Scheduled Tribes; and (3) Backward Classes.

Scheduled Castes include the Dalit, which means depressed in India, and are more commonly termed as untouchables (Daniel). The dirtiest jobs are always held by these persons (Crane, Karan and Lamb). Scheduled Tribes are also called Adivasi or aboriginals. These are communities that did not accept the Hindu caste system. They lived in Indian jungles, forests, and mountains away from the main population. Finally, Backward Classes include Hindus who converted to other religions including nomads and tribes who made their living from criminal activities (Daniel). Furthermore, based on 1901 statistics, Curtis writes: “ The enormous number of 1, 563, 000... [is] engaged in what the census terms ‘ disreputable” occupations”” (Chapter 4).

Muslims, the second most dominant in terms of religion, live mostly in the north especially in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Around 6 million Muslims migrated to Pakistan when it became a new country on the Indian sub-continent. The Muslim majority, more than 56 million, remained in India and consequently categorized under the Backward Classes (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Next, the third most dominant in terms of religion are Christians. Christians are further divided into Roman Catholics, Protestants from the Church of England, Orthodox Greeks, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other Protestants. Many Christians live in the state of Kerala (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Meanwhile, Sikhs are the fourth most dominant. Sikhism combines Hinduism and Islam. Most Sikhs live in the north, are the leading wheat farmers, and form one of the largest groups in the Indian army (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Buddhism which used to rank as India's chief religion under the Mauryan Empire has now declined as the fifth most important. Buddhists are spread out all over India. Meanwhile, the Jains come next in rank. They live on the western coast and many are wealthy businessmen. All life forms are sacred to the Jains. They do not eat meat and even cover their mouths to prevent themselves from breathing in any small insect that they might accidentally kill. Like the Buddhists, Jains are also found throughout India (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

The Parsees are particularly worth mentioning because even though they belong to the minority, they chiefly control trade and manufacturing in the major Indian cities of Bombay and Baroda. Parsees are descendants of the ancient Persian religion of Zoroaster and Persian fire worshippers. Their ancestors took refuge in India when Muslims conquered Persia in the 7th Century. Parsees are reputedly the most commercially enterprising and most highly educated. Most of Bombay's great wealth and commercial influence are credited to the Parsees. However, their funeral custom is quite revolting. Parsees feed their dead to vultures. As competing birds fight for supremacy in mid-air and meat from Parsee corpses, several incidences of torn human body parts falling all over Bombay have been reported (Curtis Chapter 4).

Aside from religion and languages, natural land barriers have also caused much cultural distinctions in India. Separated by the Vindhya and Satputra mountain ranges, north India is culturally distinct from the south. Perhaps due to this terrain, two major cultural divides have evolved in the form of: (1) language; and (2) history. Besides their Sanskrit origin, the languages spoken in the north and the south have little in common. Moreover, the several invasions on the north by various peoples also made up a big difference between the north and the south.

The south has been considerably protected from these invasions with its long mountain ranges. This eventually led to cultural distinctions and differing ways of life with the north. Southern architectural styles and musical forms, including dance and drama, are also unique compared to the rest of the country (Pkshyap). For instance, ancient Hindu temples in the north have towers with strangely curving sides. In the south, these towers rise in rectangular pyramids consisting of step-like blocks of stone (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Meanwhile, Muslims decorated their mosques with intricate designs. These beautiful designs are often inlaid in white marble with semi-precious stones. Unlike the Hindus who extensively carved human figures, Muslims are forbidden to represent human images in their places of worship. Buddhists too have developed their own art form. Buddhist wall paintings cover the walls of a room and tell a story. Miniature paintings depicting life among the higher castes or scenes from Hindu legends became popular during the 1500 up to the 1800. These paintings are usually made on small pieces of paper

(Crane, Karan and Lamb). Compared to the rest of the world, especially those countries with Western influence, India has a unique and most varied culture.

One area also worthy of discussion is Indian music. Indian music has a different scale and musicians usually do not play chords and other harmonies that are commonly known to Westerners (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Amusingly, a few Indians play music to a captive audience of dangerous crawling reptiles that are safely kept in woven baskets, usually de-fanged or de-poisoned cobras that are, well, deaf.

Contemporary Life

Contemporary life in India is greatly affected by two factors: (1) its dense population of around 1.08 billion (CIA); and (2) Hinduism which accounts for 80% of the population (Cooper). For instance, urban areas are overcrowded. In Indian streets, foot traffic is always heavy. Most Indians who report for work walk among roaming cattle to their modern factories and offices. Many still adapt ancient ways of life too. White collar workers wear western clothes to work and change to traditional Indian clothes at home. Meanwhile, slum families take turns sleeping in one-room shacks. There is not enough space for everybody and many Indians still sleep in the streets (Crane, Karan and Lamb). Likewise, India's film industry 'Bollywood' produces the largest number of films worldwide.

The Indian diet too is affected partly by both of these two factors. Although India has the largest cattle herd in the world, 80% of Indians are vegetarians

(Crown). India also happens to be the largest producer of several agricultural crops (Crane, Karan and Lamb) although these are barely enough to feed its huge population (Pandya). Moreover, 500, 000 Indian children die each year due to diarrhea. This is because less than 30% of Indian homes, only 14% rural and 35% urban, have bathrooms or toilets. Aside from open spaces such as along roadsides, farmlands, and municipal parks (Cooper), majority of Indians relieve themselves “...along railway tracks, on footpaths, on empty plots, between buildings, over drainage nullahs and in makeshift privies of sticks and gunny sacks...”

Moreover, in Chennai for instance, over 267 million liters of sewerage per day is flushed into the city’s waterways (Krishnakumar) eventhough India’s vast network of rivers, where several religious rites are made, is considered sacred by its people (Compare Infobase Pvt. Ltd.). “ Bindeshwar Pathak,... [of] ...Sulabh International... [says] ...an ancient Hindu text gave ‘ firm religious sanction’ to unsanitary behavior... forbidding defecation near dwellings. ‘ It’s very difficult to bring [toilets] into [Indian] homes,’ Pathak [says]. ‘ It’s a cultural problem...’” In contrast, ancient, pre-Hindu India as represented by the Indus Valley Civilization 4, 500 years ago had more sophisticated sewer systems and among the oldest known toilets (Cooper).

Indian contemporary life is also best shown and impacted by the sixteen headlines of the India Daily – Political News on Wednesday, 21 December 2005. Of the sixteen, five headlines show India’s concern for its borders and neighbors: Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. This is because the threat of invasion always looms in India since ancient times. Another part, consisting

of seven headlines, shows internal strife caused by India's varied cultural distinctions. And third, the remaining four headlines indicate defense spending and technological advancement (India Daily).

Military spending has set back economic development in India since its independence in 1947. With the Chinese border conflicts in the 1970s spending priorities have shifted from alleviating poverty in India to the protection of its borders (Crane, Karan and Lamb). Day by day India is becoming more highly militarized (India Daily) not only literally but also psychologically. Opinion polls indicate that 70% of Indians surveyed favored war into Pakistani territory (Chenoy).

Due to this mindset, Indian economic growth rates are low until the 1990s compared to its other Asian neighbors. Majority of Indians are still engaged in agriculture (Burki) while most rural areas still remain undeveloped. Farms are relatively small. Farm sizes continuously become smaller due to generational inheritances. There's not enough food on the Indian table or even enough money for fuel, electricity, and other basic necessities.

Likewise, the dairy cattle, traditionally kept inside a one-room mud house at night, sleeps together with the farmer's family. This is to secure the animal from thieves (Crane, Karan and Lamb).

Internal strife caused by cultural distinctions is likewise a reality in modern India. Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by a fanatic from his own Hindu caste just five months after the Indian independence in 1947 is a portent of things to come. Subsequently, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh body guards as reprisal for using the Indian Army to suppress Sikh

radicals in Amritsar. Indira's son and successor, Rajiv, was likewise assassinated during an election tour by a supporter of Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers, a rebel group (AXN Travel Network Corp.). Throughout history and into modern times, frequent Hindu-Muslim violence has left many families homeless. Women and children are usually burned alive in these religious atrocities (Mander), (Karon). Moreover, the same Hindus from different castes likewise commit mass violence against one another (Human Rights Watch).

Amazingly, India's rise to prominence in Information and Communications Technology and offshore outsourcing is worth noting (Burki). Several Indian billionaires or those of Indian descent have already graced the Forbes 500 for several years as software and offshore outsourcing tycoons (Forbes.com). The emergence of this new wealth gave Indian families a better hope for the future and a higher standard of living. A major factor in this could be attributed to success in the development of nuclear energy. India has now attained the status of a world nuclear power and this also gave Indian industries much needed electricity from stable sources.

Likewise with this stable source and fuel-alternative, India's railway network, the largest in Asia and second largest in the world, has directly impacted modern life in the country. Trains are the basic mode of transportation across India and their railways have become a major part of Indian lives. However, although nearly 85% of Indian villages have already seen electrification (Compare Infobase Pvt. Ltd.), electricity is still seldom felt in rural areas due to issues of affordability (Crane, Karan, and Lamb). Another

thing is that India's original Silicon Valley in Bangalore is now being replicated all throughout the country. This has good advantages as well as disadvantages in contemporary Indian life. For one, already crowded Indian cities are becoming much more crowded. On the other hand, Indians who work overseas come home to dysfunctional families (Pkashyap).

Another aspect of contemporary Indian life is the reality of natural disasters. A significant example is the December 2004 tsunami that destroyed Indian coastal towns along the Indian Ocean. This swept entire villages and wiped out entire families (Guardian Newspapers Limited). Likewise, the constant floods of Indian rivers also destroy many crops as much as the intense dry season in some parts of India (Crane, Karan, and Lamb). Famine is a natural Indian reality (Pandya). Many Indian families still suffer from severe malnutrition. In times of drawn out dryness, thousands die from starvation and a few from stampedes for relief goods and food (India Daily).

In the several instances described above, India's huge population, rich culture and extensively varied geography are the country's strength as well as its weakness. Indian contemporary life is basically a fusion of the old and the new which is mainly impacted or directly affected by the said factors. However, although Indians "...speak different languages, [practice] different religions, and observe different social customs, [they still]...follow certain common styles of life throughout the country" (Compare Infobase Pvt. Ltd.). For one, Indian dresses have bright hues and intricate patterns. And two, Indians have an unusual passion for cricket although hockey is the official national game. Cricket is played in " every street corner and cramped back

alley” (Crown). Considering all of these, India evokes mystery and religious wealth along with high technology but it might as well also represent mass poverty due to overpopulation, poor sanitation, famines and cultural violence.

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Appendix A

Table 1. India – 1901 Language Distribution

Language	Spoken by	Language	Spoken by
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Hindi	85, 675, 373	Malayalam	5, 428, 250
Bengali	41, 343, 762	Masalmani	3, 669, 390
Telugu	19, 885, 137	Sindhi	2, 592, 341
Marathi	18, 892, 875	Santhal	1, 709, 680
Punjabi	17, 724, 610	Western Pahari	1, 523, 098
Tamil	15, 229, 759	Assamese	1, 435, 820
Gujarathi	10, 619, 789	Gond	1, 379, 580
Kanarese	9, 751, 885	Central Pahari	1, 153, 384
Uriya	9, 010, 957	Marwadi	1, 147, 480
Burmese	5, 926, 864	Pashtu	1, 080, 931

Table 2. India – 1901 Religious Distribution

Hindus	207, 146,	Sikhs	2, 195, 268
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Mohammedans	62, 458, 061	Jains	1, 334, 148
Buddhists	9, 476, 750	Parsees	94, 190
Animistic	8, 711, 300	Jews	18, 228
Christians	2, 923, 241		

Source: William Elroy Curtis. Modern India: The Project Gutenberg E-Book [11212-8]. 21 Feb. 2004. Mississippi, USA: The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. 21 Dec. 2005 .