India’s Geography

The Indus River, home of one of the ancient world’s great river valley civilizations, flows across the northwest edge of the Indian subcontinent. A subcontinent is a large landmass that is part of a continent. Today, the Indian subcontinent is occupied by the countries of Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The Indian subcontinent includes three major geographic zones. In the far north are the Himalaya and Hindu Kush mountain systems, which separate India from the rest of Asia. In the south is the Deccan Plateau, a high plateau that receives less rain than other parts of the subcontinent. Between the mountains and the plateau are the Northern Plains, where society first developed in India. Flood deposits from three rivers—the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra—enrich the soil of the plains, making it very fertile.

Heavy rains also add to the fertility of the Northern Plains. Much of this rain is brought to India by seasonal winds called monsoons. During the summer months, monsoon winds from the southwest bring warm air and heavy rains from the Indian Ocean. Most of India’s annual rainfall occurs at this time. In the winter, northeast monsoons blow cool, dry air from Central Asia, resulting in drier months. The people of India’s first civilizations depended upon the monsoons to bring the water that their crops needed. Monsoon rains flooded rivers, which then deposited fertile silt in which farmers could grow their crops. But with the abundance of rainfall came the threat of devastation. If the monsoon rains were too heavy, crops, homes, and lives could be lost. In contrast, if the rains came too late or did not last long enough, people could not grow crops and famine became a danger.

Indus Valley Civilization

People have lived in the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent for thousands of years. At first, people lived as hunter-gatherers, but slowly people began to settle down in farming communities. In time, these communities gave rise to India’s first civilization, which developed in the valley of the Indus River. Historians generally date the beginnings of this civilization to about 2500 BC, when people there first developed a system of writing.

Cities and Settlements The first ruins of the Indus Valley civilization found by archaeologists were the remains of two large cities. Harappa, named after a nearby modern city, and Mohenjo Daro, which means “mound of the dead,” were both discovered in the 1920s. In fact, the civilization is sometimes called Harappan after the first ruins found. Since then, several large cities have been uncovered, as have hundreds of smaller towns and villages. Much of what we know about Indus society has come from studying their remains. Indus settlements were well planned and carefully laid out. Streets ran in
a grid pattern, north-south and east-west, with major avenues that were twice as wide as minor streets. People drew water from community wells or smaller wells dug in the courtyards of their homes, and public drainage systems carried away wastewater. In the largest cities, a walled, elevated citadel, or fortress, enclosed buildings such as granaries, warehouses, and meeting halls. Homes, workshops, and shrines were built outside the citadel. Such planning and uniformity among cities suggests that a central authority held power over the civilization.

**Economy** Historians believe the economy of the Indus civilization focused on agriculture and trade. Most people probably farmed and herded livestock. In cities, however, many people specialized in crafts such as pottery, metal-work, and jewelry. Example of all these crafts have been found in Harappan cities. The Indus traded the goods they produced not only with people of nearby communities but with distant civilizations as well. Traders from the Indus Valley brought goods to locations as distant as Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and Mesopotamia.

**Society** Unfortunately, archaeologists and historians have not been able to learn many details about Indus society. Although the people of the Indus Valley had a writing system, historians are not yet able to read it. The inability to read what people wrote makes it difficult to learn about society and daily life. Based on material evidence, some scholars believe that Indus civilization was a single society rather than a collection of independent city-states. As you have already read, cities and towns throughout the Indus Valley were remarkably similar. In addition, the people of the Indus Valley apparently shared common tool designs and a standard set of weights and measures. These factors all suggest a single authority in control, though it is not yet possible to know for sure.

**Decline** The Indus Valley civilization thrived from about 2500 BC to 2000 BC. After that time, the civilization began to decline. For example, the city of Mohenjo Daro was abandoned. No one knows what led to the decline of the Indus civilization, or even if there was a single cause. Evidence from Mohenjo Daro suggests that the city suffered repeated flooding, which may indicate environmental reasons. Ancient records mention a river, the Sarasvati, which once flowed through the Indus Valley but later disappeared. The disappearance of that river could have had devastating effects on agriculture and sped the decline. Some historians also argue that invasion and disease helped end the civilization, though others argue that the available evidence does not support either conclusion. In truth, we may never know just why the Indus civilization disappeared.

**Source:** *World History: Human Legacy, Susan Elizabeth Ramírez et al., Holt*