

SOUTH ASIA

SG 3 Part Culture & Language

I. INDUS RIVER CULTURE

- A. South Asia is the home of one of the world's oldest civilizations (in Mohenjo-Daro & Harappa).
 - 1. Created uniform system of weights & measures.
 - 2. Created a system of writing (has not been decoded, called Indus script)
 - 3. Language family unknown, possibly Dravidian.
 - 4. They lived in houses made of mud and brick. Ruins still exist today.





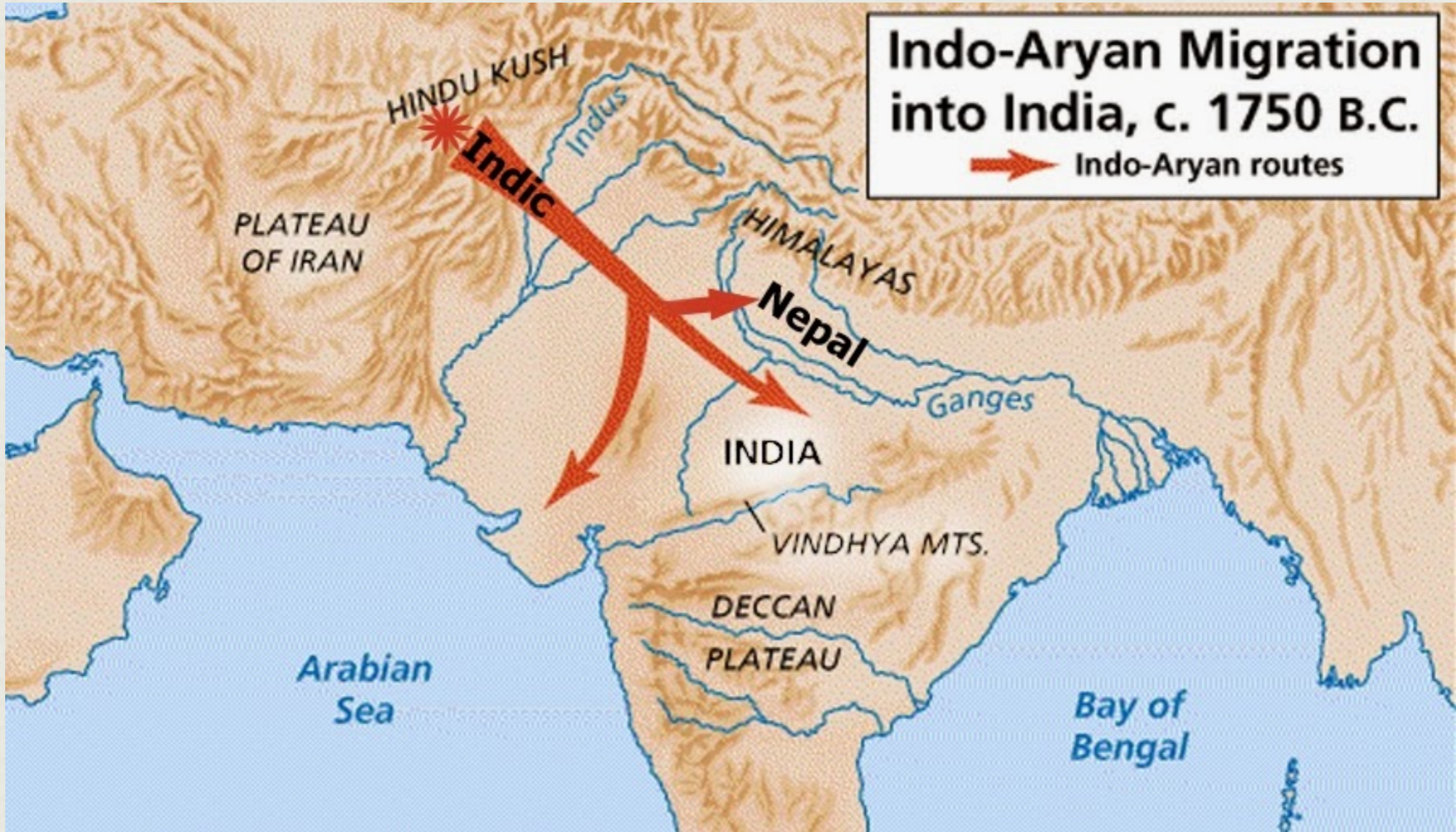
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- The region has been impacted by the incursion & assimilation of different ethnic groups, the rise and fall of powerful empires, and the effects of British colonial rule that lasted over 100 years (mid-1800s to mid-1900s).

II. THE ARYANS ARRIVE

- A. The Aryans of Persia (a warrior people from present day Iran) began crossing the Hindu Kush in 1500 B.C.E. and settled in the northern Indus plain, an area called “the Punjab.”
 - 1. They spoke an Indo-European language.
 - 2. Their language is called Sanskrit, and the oldest Hindu texts, the Rig Vedas (prime source of Aryan culture), are written in this language.



- Most all of the knowledge we have about Aryan culture comes from the Rig Vedas and epic stories from the period, all written in Sanskrit and still learned today.
- Hinduism became the great unifying force on the Indian subcontinent prior to the introduction of Buddhism (500s BCE & Islam 1200s CE).
- Present day Hindu gods mentioned in the Rig Veda include: Indra, a war god; Shiva from an older god called Rudra who developed from a pre-Aryan fertility deity; Agni, a fire god...and over 33 more.
- The Aryans would have descended from the same ethnic people who were the Greeks. The Greeks also had a large pantheon of gods (Zeus, Hera, Artemis, Apollo, etc...)

- 3. They lived in houses of wood and bamboo, thus leaving no archaeological or artistic record.
- 4. They showed disdain for the native peoples who they described as “dark-skinned.”
- 5. Cattle was served as a measure of value. They did eat beef.
- 6. We know they lived in tribes headed by a chief called a raja.
 - a. Aryans divided their people into 3 classes of warriors, priests, & commoners (precursor to caste system).
 - b. Later this social class system became more complex. They divided their people into 4 varnas (“social order”). The word varna means “skin covering.”

III. THE CASTE SYSTEM

- A. The Aryans placed themselves in the three highest classes of priests (brahmans), warriors (kshatriyas), and other Aryans citizens, called vaishyas. A term later used to describe merchants and artisans.
- B. At the bottom of the varna system were the sudras, the dark-skinned native peoples who they conquered and reduced to slavery or serfdom. They were forced to perform menial tasks (servants)

- C. Each varna had its own color and was believed to have all originated from a part of the original cosmic man-god:
 - Brahman - white, came from his mouth
 - Kshatriya - red, came from his arms
 - Vaishtrya - brown, came from his thighs
 - Sudras - black, came from his feet

- D. A great social gap existed between the top 3 castes (Aryan conquerers) and the sudras (Dravidian conquered).
- E. The sudras, however, were not at the very bottom of society. These people were not considered a class at all and were called “untouchables” based on the work they did: attendants of cremation grounds, working with animal carcasses, leather workers, etc...
 - 1. The “untouchable” class are called “dalits” today. Dalit means “ground; suppressed; crushed and is derived from Sanskrit.
- F. The fact that the highest caste became brahman in what was a warrior society shows the importance of religion to the Aryan culture.

VI. THE JATI SYSTEM

“CASTES WITHIN CASTES”

- A. Within the 4 castes and the “untouchables” grew another social system called the “jati.” It affected people’s lives more intimately than the castes.
- B. Because many different local Dravidian languages were spoken...the way the varna was implemented was slightly different in various regions.

- C. Jati groups:
 - 1. were endogamous (married within their group) & and you were born into your jati, your jati was like a family
 - 2. shared a common religious heritage & traditional values
 - 3. had their own way of life & dietary rules
 - 4. frequently had the same occupation
 - 5. to be outcast from your jati was like being shunned by your family and no other jati would accept you

V. THE ARYANS EXPAND & OTHER CULTURAL INFLUENCES

- A. The Aryans expanded into northern India, but not as much into southern India due to the rough terrain between the Ghats.
 - 1. Because of this, the southern people of India who were there before the Aryans arrived were able to retain their culture, with only some Aryan influence.
 - 2. The people of southern India continue to speak Dravidian (ex: Tamil) languages to this day (different language family from Indo-European)

- B. By the 6th ct. BCE there were 16 kingdoms, the largest being Magadah in the northeast along the Ganges
- C. In modern day Pakistan during this period the Persians invaded and took over the northwest, thus Persian culture influenced the region.
- D. Alexander the Great of Macedonia conquered the Persian empire and introduced Hellenic culture to the region.



VI. NATURAL CULTURAL BOUNDARIES TAKE SHAPE

- A. Several dynasties came and went and between 321-181 BCE there existed the great Mauryan Empire.
- B. After the death of Alexander, the Mauryan empire's founder, Chandragupta made a treaty with Selceucus, one of Alexander's generals and founder of the Seleucid Empire. They drew a boundary along the Hindu Kush.
- C. The Aryan's were at their height during this period, but the empire would fall and splinter. From there it would be 500 years of political divisions in India.

VII. LANGUAGES

- A. Hindi & English are the official languages of India.
 - 1. English is considered a unifying language and many Indians are bilingual.
 - 1. There are many other languages spoken as well: Bengali, Tamil, & Urdu
- B. Urdu is a mixture of a form of Hindi with Arabic script & is the official language of Pakistan.
- C. In Sri Lanka, 2 major languages are spoken: the Sinhalese speak Sinhala & the Tamils speak Tamil.



- D. In all there are over 1,600 languages & dialects spoken in India alone.
- 1. Mainly Indo-European in the north of India;
- 2. Dravidian languages in the south.

VIII. RELIGION

- A. The main religion of India is Hinduism, but 3 other religions were founded in South Asia:
 - 1. Jainism - built around an extreme code of nonviolence (influenced Gandhi)
 - 2. Buddhism - at its height during the reign of Asoka who converted and helped spread it into Sri Lanka (and from there SE Asia), after his death, Hinduism regained its importance.

- 3. Sikhism - combines aspects of Hinduism & strict monotheism (from Islam). They follow and/or wear the 5 symbols of faith:
 - 1. Kesh - uncut hair
 - 2. Kara - a steel bracelet
 - 3. Kanga - a wooden comb
 - 4. Kaccha - undergarments made from cotton
 - 5. Kirpan - a steel sword (or dagger in places like the U.K.)
 - (a) Sikhs are known for their military might and the British used them as troops. They have also been used as bodyguards by Indian leaders until Indian PM Indira Gandhi was assassinated by 2 of her Sikh bodyguards.



- B. The Parsi (means “Persian”) are a small community of people in South Asia who migrated from present-day (Iran) after Muslims began invading Persian territory.
 - 1. They arrived in South Asia as refugees and follow the oldest monotheistic religion in the world: Zoroastrianism (at one time one of the most powerful religions in existence).
 - 2. Today the community is in danger from being TOO successful. Women are well educated and married couples are not having as many children. Low fertility rates are being addressed by the communities.

IX. SPEAKING OF ISLAM...

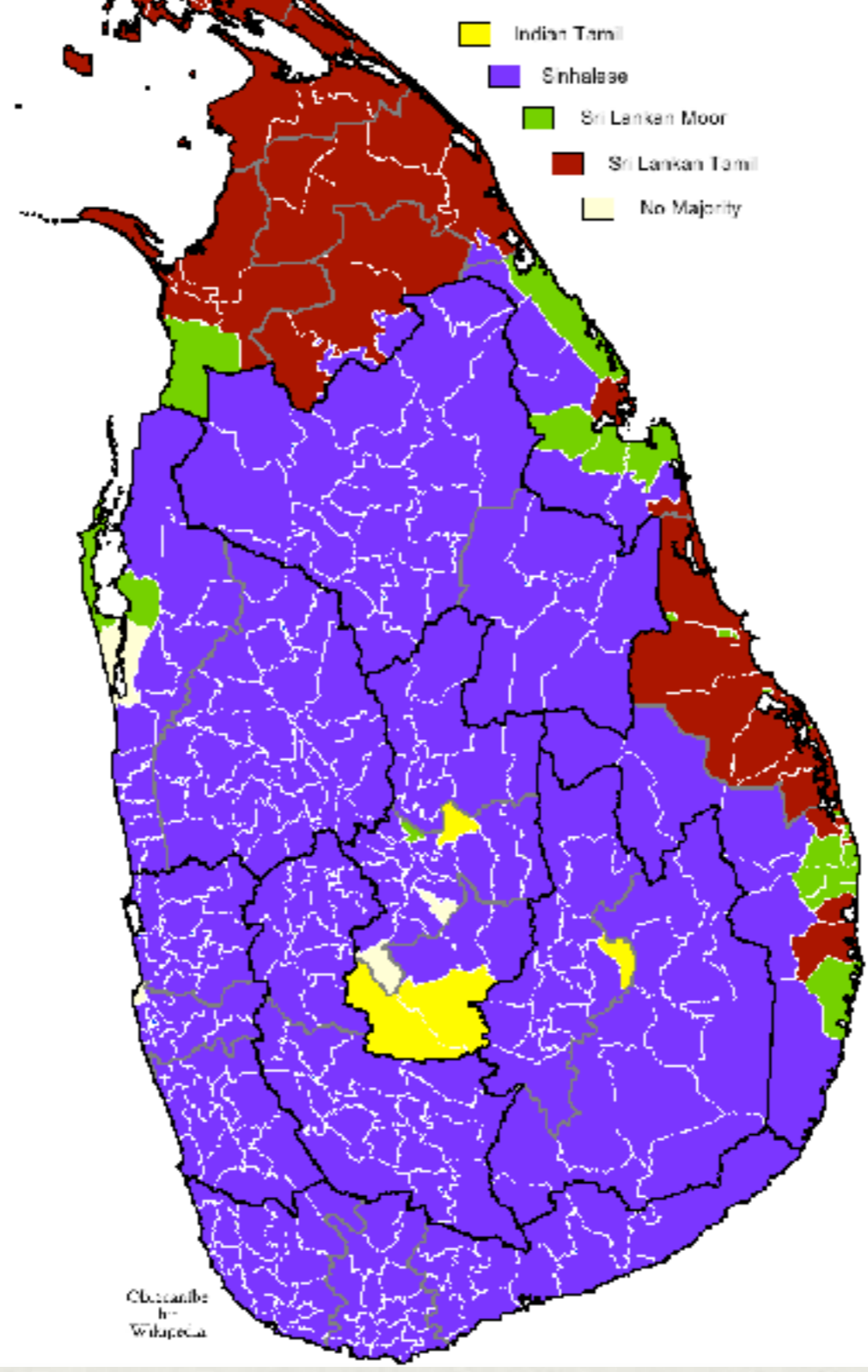
- A. Islam was brought to India by Arab traders in 700s BCE. It spread in areas that were Buddhist [Punjab in the northwest (think Pakistan) & Bengal in the East (think Bangladesh)]
- B. Muslim invasions began in the 1200s and the Mughal dynasty was founded in the 1700s (Taj Mahal built and other survive from this time period)

- C. Muslims form an important minority in India, but are the majority in Pakistan & Bangladesh (as well as the disputed Kashmir region of India).
- D. Arab traders also traded across the Indian Ocean spreading their religion to the Maldives and other islands as well as present-day Indonesia.

X. ETHNIC CONFLICTS

- A. Sri Lanka (SL) was a politically stable country with a growing economy after independence until the 1980's. Despite deaths from ethnic conflicts, SL has the highest life expectancy rate in South Asia.
- 1. Sri Lanka is ethnically divided between the mainly Buddhist Sinhalese (majority) in the central and southern part of the island and the Muslim Sri Lankan Tamil in the north (minority).

Sri Lanka: Majority Ethnicity by DS Division, 2012 Census



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- 2. The Tamil people (both of Sri Lankan & Indian origins) began fighting for their “rights” and a defined Tamil “homeland” or “eelam.”
- (a) Problems arose after independence due to government policies that favored the Sinhalese (example: the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 that made Sinhala the only official language thus restricting many government jobs to only those who could speak Sinhala. There were also changes to university admission policies that favored the Sinhalese causing the Tamils to lose educational opportunities.

- 3. An attack on the SL military by the “Tamil Tigers” AKA the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983 and the anti-Tamil riots that followed began the civil war that has raged in SL ever since.
 - (a) There have been several peace deals and truces, as well as a concession by the SL government by making Tamil an official language alongside Sinhala.
 - (b) Casualties have grown to over 65,000 in the last 30 years.

- B. India & Pakistan have been fighting since independence. The countries were created based on language, but religion is the main reason for continued conflict today (see Unit 9 Preview) as well as territory such as Kashmir.
- 1. Intra-state conflicts in India between the Hindu majority and the Muslim & Christian minorities.

- C. Nepal has been a monarchy through most of its history and is mainly Hindu despite being associated with Buddhism. In the 1980's it became a constitutional monarchy.
- 1. The monarchy ended in 2008 when the Communist party of Nepal won the majority of parliamentary seats. The government had been battling Maoist rebels since the 1980's. In 2009, the Maoist-led government was overthrown, but in 2011 that government was overthrown and a new Communist PM was chosen. In 2014, an agreement was met between the main parties.

- D. In summation, the geographic concentration of different ethnic groups in South Asia, strong feelings of cultural pride, and perceptions of being excluded and discriminated against politically, culturally, & economically by a dominant group all form a potent mix that has led to nationalistic fervor & ethnic strife.