The Republic of India - the world's seventh largest country - extends from high in the Himalayas, through the Tropic of Cancer, to the warm waters of the Indian Ocean at Cape Comorin. India is the world's second most populous nation after China, and the largest democracy. The N contains the mountains and foothills of the Himalayan range. Rivers such as the Brahmaputra, Indus and Ganges (Ganga) rise in the Himalayas and flow across the fertile N plains. S India consists of a large plateau called the Deccan which is bordered by two mountain ranges, the W and E Ghats.

The Karakoram Range in the far N has permanently snow-covered peaks. The E Ganges delta has mangrove swamps. Between the gulfs of Kutch and Cambay are the deciduous forest habitats of the last of India's wild lions. The Ghats are clad in heavy rainforest.

**Climate**

India has three seasons. The weather during the cool season - from October to February - is mild in the N plains. S India remains hot, though temperatures are a little lower than for the rest of the year. Temperatures on the N plains sometimes soar to 49°C (120°F) during the hot season from March to the end of June. The monsoon season starts in the middle of June and continues into September. At this time, moist SE winds from the Indian Ocean bring heavy rains to India. Darjeeling in the NE has an average annual rainfall of 3,040mm (120in), but parts of the Great Indian Desert in the NW have only 50mm (2in) of rain a year. The monsoon rains are essential for India's farmers. If they arrive late, crops may be ruined. If the rainfall is considerably higher than average, floods may cause great destruction.

**History**

One of the world's oldest civilizations flourished in the Lower Indus Valley, c.2500-1700 bc. In c.1500 bc Aryans conquered India and established an early form of Hinduism. In 327-25 bc Alexander the Great conquered part of NW India. Chandragupta founded the Maurya empire. His grandson, Ashoka, unified India and established Buddhism in the 3rd century bc. The Chola established a S trading kingdom in the 2nd century ad. In the 4th and 5th centuries ad N India flourished under the Gupta dynasty. The 7th century is the classical period of India's history. Islam was introduced from about ad 1000. In 1192, the Delhi Sultanate became India's first Muslim kingdom. In 1526, Babur founded the Mogul empire. In the 17th century, India became a centre of Islamic art and architecture under Shah Jahan (who built the Taj Mahal) and Aurangzeb.

In the 17th century, the Maratha successfully resisted European imperial ambitions in the guise of the East India Company. European powers, particularly England and France, contested to increase their influence. In 1757, Robert Clive defeated the French-backed Nawab of Bengal and took Calcutta, allowing the East India Company to take control on behalf of Britain. India became one of the most important territories of the British Empire. Civil unrest culminated in the Indian Mutiny (1857-58). Reforms failed to dampen nationalism, and the Congress Party formed (1885). In 1906 the Muslim League was founded to protect Muslim minority rights. Following World War 1, Gandhi led a popular
campaign of non-violent disobedience and passive resistance to British rule. The Amritsar Massacre (1919) intensified Indian nationalism. In August 1947, British India was partitioned into two independent countries, India and the Muslim state of Pakistan. The ensuing migrations and disputes killed more than 500,000. Jawaharlal Nehru of the Congress Party was India’s first prime minister.

Politics

Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 by a Hindu extremist who hated him for his tolerance towards Muslims. The country adopted a new constitution that year making the country a democratic republic within the Commonwealth, and elections were held in 1951 and 1952. India's first prime minister was Jawaharlal Nehru. The government sought to develop the economy and raise living standards, while, on the international stage, Nehru won great respect for his policy of non-alignment and neutrality. The disputed status of Kashmir was then India's thorniest security problem.

In 1966, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, took office. Her Congress Party lost support because of food shortages, unemployment and other problems. In 1971, India helped the people of East Pakistan achieve independence from West Pakistan to become Bangladesh. India tested its first atomic bomb in 1974, but pledged to use nuclear power for peaceful purposes only. In 1977, Mrs Gandhi lost her seat in parliament and her Congress Party was defeated by the Janata Party, a coalition led by Morarji R. Desai. Disputes in the Janata Party led to Desai's resignation in 1979 and, in 1980, Congress-I (the I standing for Indira) won the elections. Mrs Gandhi again became prime minister, but her government faced many problems. Many Sikhs wanted more control in Punjab, and Sikh radicals began to commit acts of violence to draw attention to their cause. In 1984, armed Sikhs occupied the sacred Golden Temple in Amritsar. In response, Indian troops attacked the temple, causing much damage and many deaths. In October, 1984, two of Mrs Gandhi's Sikh guards assassinated her. Her son, Rajiv, was chosen to succeed her as prime minister but, in 1989, Congress lost its majority in parliament and Rajiv resigned. During elections in 1991 he was assassinated by Tamil extremists.

India is a vast country with an enormous diversity of cultures. It has more than a dozen major languages and many minor ones. The national language Hindi and the Dravidian languages of the south (Kannada, Tamil, Telugu and Malayam) are Indo-European. Sino-Tibetan languages are spoken in the N and E.

Hinduism is all-pervasive and Buddhism is slowly reviving in the country of its origin. Jainism is strong in the merchant towns around Mount Abu in the Aravallis hills north of Ahmadabad. Islam has contributed many mosques and monuments, the Taj Mahal being the best known, and India retains a large Muslim minority. The Punjab's militant Sikhs now seek separation. However, India's most intractable problem remains the divided region of Kashmir, the subject of a long conflict between India and Pakistan. In 2004 and 2005 both countries sought ways of easing the tension, including the opening up of cross-border transport services. In 2006, bombings in Mumbai were blamed on Pakistan, causing setbacks, but the peace process was resumed.

Economy

India is a 'low-income' developing country. While it ranked 11th in total gross national product in 2004, its per capita GNP of US$440 placed it among the world's poorer countries. In the 1990s, the government introduced private enterprise policies to stimulate growth. Farming employs a high proportion of the people. The main crops are rice, wheat, millet, sorghum, peas and beans. India has more cattle than any other country; milk is produced, but Hindus do not eat beef. Manufacturing has
expands greatly since 1947 to include high-tech goods, iron and steel, machinery, textiles, jewellery and transport equipment. In the 2000s a booming IT and services sector has brought massive economic growth, but severe inequality remain a major problem.