**Physical features of India**

**Lesson 1**

**Focus question: *What were the physical features of India and how did these features influence people’s lives?***

**Historical context**

* In one sense, India appears as an outcrop of the Asian continent, but it is part of the Indo-Australian tectonic plate. This tectonic plate is inching north and the Himalayan Mountains are the result of the two plates moving together and uplifting along the line where they meet. India is thus appropriately called a subcontinent, although the term Indian subcontinent is politically unacceptable to some. The objections may stem from the fact that the subcontinent now also includes other countries besides India, including Pakistan, and so Southern Asia is a more acceptable term. The northern boundary of the region is the formidable Himalayan Mountains, while to the north-west is the Hindu Kush mountain range.
* India has vastly different landscapes, from the fertile Indo-Gangetic plain in the north to the Thar Desert in the West, from the sometimes rugged Deccan Plateau in central India to the narrow coastal plains of the east and west. Along the coasts are the Eastern and Western Ghats, rug\*\*\*\*\*ed escarpments and low mountain ranges that separate the Deccan Plateau from the narrow coastal plains. These are areas of great bio-diversity and the Western Ghats is a UNESCO World Heritage site.
* India has a diverse climate which can largely be called tropical, but there are many areas of localised climatic conditions. The key influences on India’s climate are the Himalayas and the Thar Desert. The extremely cold winds emanating from Central Asia are deflected by the Himalayas and thus northern India is kept generally warm and quite hot in summer. The country’s generally tropical conditions mean that monsoons play a significant role in India’s climate. These rains are heavy and seasonal and are vital to replenish India’s river systems. Failure of the monsoons can lead to extreme drought and subsequent famine.
* The northern plain is one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world and is fed by the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra Rivers. Access to India in ancient times via the Himalayas was practically impossible, but passes through the Hindu Kush Mountain Range in the north-west encouraged the earliest civilisation in India along the Indus River. The Indus River was a major attraction to settlers.
* Evidence of homo-sapiens settlement in India dates back some 70 000 years, with India probably being a major ‘stop-off’ on the journey of modern humans to south East Asia and eventually Australia. Any continuous history of settlement is difficult to determine because of the scarcity of the archaeological record, but India was host to one of the earliest ‘civilisations’ in the world, the Harappan Civilisation of the Indus Valley. This civilisation is on a par with the other great River Valley civilisations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and China.

**Suggested learning activities**

Examine a map of India to determine its geographical location

Examine Map 1 on the sheet *Physical features of India*.

* Locate India on the satellite image (map 1), taking note of where it is situated in terms of surrounding regions and bodies of water.

**Question:**

*Which of the following statements are true and false? Write a correct statement for each one you identify as false.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| India is the largest island in Asia. India is not an island. | True / False |
| India is completely covered by lush forests. India have a variety of climates. | True / False |
| Most of the countries which border India are to the north. | True / False |
| India would most likely have a variety of climate types. | True / False |
| India is situated to the east of Australia. India is NorthWest of Australia | True / False |

Examine a map and visual sources to determine the physical features of India.

Examine Map 2 and photographs 1a to 1f on the sheet *Physical features of India*.

* Examine the vertical scale on Map 2 to determine the general height of major areas of the ‘Indian subcontinent’ (Mt Kosciuszko is 2228 metres high).
* Note the significant physical features of the Himalayan and Hindu Kush Mountains, the dominance of the Indo-Gangetic plain and its fertile river valleys in the north, the Deccan Plateau in central India and the narrow coastal plains.
* India has several natural frontiers (geographical features which might have helped to protect India in ancient times). Identify these natural frontiers.
* Examine the photographs of India’s landscapes (sources 1a to 1f). Use a table similar to the one below to describe the key characteristics of each landscape. The first one has been completed.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **A** | Dry desert areas with extensive sand dunes and low scrubby vegetation |
| **B** |  Cold, windy, snowy, mountain climate with pine trees |
| **C** | Fertile valley with lots of farmland |
| **D** | Coastal beaches, tropical climate |
| **E** | Flooded area with lots of trees and water |
| **F** | Rocky, rough |

**Examine primary sources to identify the perspective of people from the past**

Use the supporting learning resources *Evidence* and *Perspective* to revise these key historical concepts.

Examine source 2 on the sheet *Physical features of India*.

**Questions**:

*Who is Indra?*

*A thunder god*

*How is Indra meant to be seen by readers of this hymn?*

*Very important*

*The ‘dragon’ referred to in the hymn is Vritra the deity representing drought. How does this hymn emphasise the importance of rivers and river systems in India?*

*He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft [divided] the channels of the mountain torrents*

*What has Indra contributed to the welfare of India according to this hymn?*

*I WILL declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder.*

*How important a god does Indra seem to be? Use evidence from the source to explain your response.*

*Very important.* *He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft [divided] the channels of the mountain torrents… Giver of horses, Indra, giver, thou, of kine [cattle], giver of barley, thou art Lord and guard of wealth*

*Which phrase or phrases suggest ancient Indian people believed Indra had an important role in the development of India’s physical features?*

*He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft [divided] the channels of the mountain torrents*

*What appears to be the purpose of this hymn?*

*To thank Indra*

**Historical context:**

* The oldest urban culture in India is the Indus Valley civilisation, also known as the Harappan Civilisation from one of its major cities, Harappa. The availability of a large river system in the north-west probably attracted people to move into the region from the harsher environments of Afghanistan by using passes through the Hindu Kush and Himalayan Mountains. Not a great deal is known about the origins and development of this culture, as the main source of information is archaeological. The Harappans had a written script but it is still un-deciphered. The ethnic origin of the Harappans is still unclear, but these people established a sophisticated urban culture which showed elements of town planning and well-designed brick structures. They did not move out of the Indus River Valley, but used the agricultural wealth of the region to sustain them.

**Suggested learning activities**

Examine a source to determine the effects of the physical features of India on settlement choices

Use the supporting learning resource *Cause and effect*to revise this key historical concept.

Examine source 3 on the sheet *Physical features of India*.

**Questions**:

*How might the physical features of this area explain why the Harappan people remained in the Indus River region and did not expand their culture further into India?*

*How might this have affected the ability of the Harappan culture to survive?*

* Complete a table similar to the one below to consolidate knowledge of the physical features of India. Link the terms provided to the correct definition.

agriculture, Indus River, Indra, Deccan Plateau, Ganges River, Harappa, Rig Veda

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Key term** | **Definition** |
| Indus River | the major river in the Indus Valley region |
| Harappa | the name of an ancient Indian city |
| Indra | the ancient Indian god responsible for bringing rain |
| Rig Veda | a collection of hymns dedicated to the gods |
| Deccan Plateau | high upland region in the central part of India |
| Ganges River | major river in north eastern India |
| agriculture | the practice of farming |