

# Influence of Geography in Indian Culture

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**Abstract – Geography is a key element in strategic thinking and is an important source to explain strategic culture. There are many misconceptions about India's strategic culture, perhaps because it has not been clearly articulated and its security environment is relatively unsettled. The country is both a continental and maritime nation. Its geography offers a number of explanations to its insular nature, sense of civilization and destiny. As the country did not inherit clearly demarcated borders on Independence, its reliance on its frontiers being bastions for defence and security has proved delusive. A deeper understanding of the nature of terrain along its borders is necessary. India's maritime heritage and responsibilities are also based on its geographic location. While geography remains unchanging, it is the shape of human behaviour that has changed geo-political equations.**

**Keywords: Geography, Indian Culture, Human Behaviour, Important, Security, Environment, Responsibilities, etc.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Geography affects strategic and operational planning, tactics, logistics, operations, relations with civilian populations, and the military evaluations of areas. Geography is not itself an element of national power, which is normally described as having political, economic, and military elements. Geography is better viewed as the foundation on which these three elements of national power are built. A thorough knowledge of a broad range of geographic factors is necessary in order to effectively wield the elements of national power in pursuit of national interests. Any credible military response to a regional conflict requires an understanding of the geography of that region, as geographic conditions may enhance or constrain the exercise of military power. "Military operations are drastically affected by many considerations, one of the most important of which is the geography of the region." (GOI, 2007) Geographic factors in the context of changing political scenarios exert their own influence on the making of strategic policy.

A country's strategic culture is the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour of its national strategic community. It is underlined by continuity of thought amongst individuals as well as by organisations within a country. It is often said that India lacks a strategic culture. This view is especially prevalent amongst the Western analysts, and needs to be corrected. There is always a considered rationale for the manner in which a nation acts.

Power and national security are essentially based on geographic factors. The significance of geography, climate and resources is a key element in strategic thinking and remains an important source of strategic culture. Geographical circumstances are the key to understanding why some countries adopt particular strategic policies rather than others. Deeply embedded thoughts related to Indian geography have exerted a powerful influence in shaping its strategic thinking.

India's extraordinary history is intimately tied to its geography. At a focal point in the Asian landmass, it has always been an invader's paradise, while, at the same time, its natural isolation from the rest of Asia allowed it to adapt to, and absorb, many of the people who entered the subcontinent. No matter how many Persians, Greeks, Mongols, Arabs, Portuguese, British and other peoples came to plunder, trade or rule, India has survived their depredations. India has always been simply too big, too complicated, and too culturally strong to let any single empire or constituency dominate it for long. In any case, history has a different slant depending on who has recorded it. India's national security environment is determined by a complex interplay of its geographical attributes, historical legacy, and socio-economic circumstances as well as regional and global developments.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

India is the seventh largest country in the world with a land area of 3.2 million sq km. Its territorial borders were settled by adjudication but later have been

forged through conflict and are still contested. India's land boundaries total 15,106.7 km. India shares common borders with Pakistan (3,323 km; the Jammu and Kashmir border is 1,085 km), China (Line of Actual Control is 3,488 km), Bhutan (699 km), Nepal (1,751 km), Myanmar (1,643 km), and Bangladesh (4,096.7 km).<sup>2</sup> Although India and Sri Lanka do not share a land boundary, the narrowest distance between the two countries is only 64 km across the Palk Strait. Most of Jammu and Kashmir is contested with Pakistan, and the Aksai Chin area of Jammu and Kashmir is disputed with China, as is the border of Arunachal Pradesh in northeast India. Nepal claims a 75 sq km area called Kalapani. Possession of the recently emerged New Moore Island (South Talpatty) in the Bay of Bengal has been disputed by Bangladesh, and much of the border with Bangladesh is not demarcated.

The Indian subcontinent is the southern geo-political region of Asia comprising territories which geographically lie on the Indian Plate (bordered on the north by the Eurasian Plate) and are south of the Himalayas and the Hindu Kush mountain ranges. It is surrounded (from west to east) by Western Asia, Central Asia, Eastern Asia, and Southeast Asia. This vast and natural entity has the Arabian Sea on its west, the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea to its east and the Indian Ocean to the south. Its area of over 4.5 million sq km is home to one-fourth of the world's population (Peter, 2002). It now comprises the independent countries of Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. India is by far the largest entity and shares borders with the other four, none of whom share borders amongst each other. Non-contiguous to the mainland are the Lakshadweep Islands in the Arabian Sea and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands located 1,300 km from the mainland in the Bay of Bengal.

While India is seen as one entity, when viewed physically against the backdrop of Asia, it is physically separated from the rest of Asia by high mountain ranges. India has three main geological regions, the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Himalayas—collectively known as North India—and the Peninsula, or South India. Geographically, India is divided by the Vindhya ranges into north and south (or peninsular) India (Rooyen, 2008). India has diverse regions that include highlands, plains, deserts, and river valleys. The country's highest elevation is 8,598 metres at Kanchenjunga, which is the third highest mountain in the world and located in the Himalayas. The Gangetic plain and the rivers of the Punjab irrigate the fertile soil making it a rich agricultural region, which has attracted invaders through the millennia. India has approximately 14,500 km of inland waterways, but their transportation potential is vastly underused. The exact number of ethnic groups in India depends on the source and method of counting. Only the continent of Africa exceeds the linguistic, cultural, and genetic diversity of India: 72 percent of the population is Indo-

Aryan, 25 percent Dravidian, and 3 percent Mongoloid and other. Each of these groups can be further subdivided into numerous combinations of language, religion, and caste.

India shares maritime borders with five countries. Its total coastline is 7,516 km in length, comprising 5,422 km for the mainland, 132 km for the Lakshadweep Islands, and 1,962 km for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The Indian peninsula juts 1,980 km into the Indian Ocean. Fifty percent of the Indian Ocean basin lies within a 1,500 km radius of India, a reality that has strategic implications. Under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, India has a 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), a 12 nautical mile territorial sea, a 24 nautical mile contiguous zone, and a legal continental shelf extending to a depth of 2,500 metres or to the end of the continental margin. India has 1,197 islands in the Indian Ocean. (572 in the Andaman and Nicobar – 38 of which are inhabited – and 23 in the Lakshadweep – 10 of which are inhabited. In addition, there are 447 islands off the western coast and 151 islands off the eastern coast).

The total number of languages and dialects varies by the source and counting method, and many Indians speak more than one language. The census lists 114 languages (22 of which are spoken by one million or more persons) that are further categorized into 216 dialects or "mother tongues" spoken by 10,000 or more speakers. An estimated 850 languages are in daily use, and there are more than 1,600 dialects. Hindi is the official language and the most commonly spoken, but not all dialects are mutually comprehensible. English has official status and is widely used.

**The Identity of India:** The identity of India refers to the kind of country it is, and wishes to be. The essence of Indian security policy lies in its quest for strategic autonomy. To understand this, it must be realised that India is largely friendless in the world today. India has friendly relations with many states but friendship with none. India's relationship with the US is constrained by many factors, including the latter's security links with Pakistan. An important factor that places limits on US-India security relations is that the former does not regard India as a member of the 'democratic core' of states, as it is not a part of any security pact led by the US. India, therefore, cannot rely on the US for security backup as it successfully depended for two decades upon the Soviet Union. Also, India is just too big to be accommodated in any security pact as a junior partner. Faced by varied threats and adversaries, India has no option but to rely on its own capabilities (GOI, 2006) These capabilities, while significant in certain contexts, are by no means sufficient and are prone to debilitating weakness in critical areas.

Geography, history and resources have been key elements in strategic thinking throughout the millennia and remain important sources of strategic culture. Maintaining democracy and promoting development—and treating both as equally important and necessary—is the biggest security challenge facing India. Over 60 years of genuine liberal democracy in a pluralist, multicultural, socio-economically deprived, continent-sized setting is surely an achievement of world historical importance that deserves to be recognised.

In 1947, India inherited many disadvantages—the accumulated subtractions of many centuries—but one great advantage, that of resurgent nationalism. There are five important features of the Indian identity. These are:

- India is a republic, i.e. a democracy with an elected head.
- It is a secular country. The state is not committed to a particular religion.
- India is committed to social justice and equality for its citizens. The Directive Principles of the Constitution are an egalitarian vision of Indian society.
- India is a plural society. It cherishes its diversity and allows its different communities full freedom to express themselves.
- India is not just a nation-state but distinct civilisations with its own perspective on the world. India sees the world through its own eyes, avoids being tied to a particular country or bloc, and brings to the international community its own distinct voice. India's traditional neutrality is a political expression of this.

India has not inherited any strategic thought, as it has always been a land divided geographically and otherwise. History shows that there had been little opportunity or reason for conceptualising any such thought, as it was never considered a *sine qua non* of statecraft. Against this backdrop, to understand better the security challenges that confront India, there is a need to analyse who we are, what moves us, what we stand for, where we are planning to go, why we want to go there and how we propose to get there. “Deeply embedded habits of thoughts related to Indian geography, history, culture.... exert a powerful influence....they will, in the foreseeable future, help to shape its strategic thinking and its strategy.

India is an ancient civilisations and Hinduism is the oldest of the world's religions. It is a country where the burden of history hangs heavy over the national psyche. Its way of looking at the world and at itself is

unique, shaped by its geography, history and religious influence. Its civilizational heritage makes it place morality above reality, yet it has the ability to absorb or permanently subdue other influences. It is a country where ethnic identity can transcend national identity, yet nationalism is placed at a high pedestal in the minds of the people. It, therefore, shapes national behaviour and defines values in discernible and measurable ways. India's historical experience has generated various ideas on issues of national strategy and policy.

**Continental Aspects:** While geography is the study of the physical environment, its centrality is to discover in what ways and to what extent this environment affected history. Geographical analysis can offer more towards the understanding of international politics than just an appreciation of the facts of location (Tanham, 1992). Borders define nationhood and sovereignty. India never had borders till Independence. Essentially, its boundaries over the centuries can best be termed as ‘frontiers’ i.e. a demarcation between territories with independent sovereignties. A frontier constitutes “an area of separation” between two regions of “more or less homogeneous, and usually denser, population.” (Krishna, 2005). It is of such frontiers that Lord Curzon spoke when, in his classic essay bearing that name, he described them as “the razor's edge” on which hang the modern issues of war and peace and of life or death to nations (Gordon East, 2002). Warfare has always occurred for the defence of frontiers. In the making of frontiers, international law has a significant role to play. The recognition of the existence, sanctity and permanence of frontiers is one of the foundations on which the law of nations has been built. Frontiers once negotiated and demarcated cannot be altered unilaterally. They are inviolate and unalterable save through negotiation, for any use of force majeure in such cases would be a denial of international law itself. Vital as the element of power politics is, human geography plays an equally important part. What makes for frontiers, and frontier problems, are such factors as race, population, language, geography and access to the sea.<sup>13</sup> Religion also plays an important role in varying degrees, e.g. the birth of Pakistan (1947) and Israel (1948). Also, self-determination has been a powerful weapon in creating new frontiers by disrupting ancient ones.

## CONCLUSION:

Geography has profoundly affected India's history and insular outlook, and, therefore, its strategic culture. India's strategic location, size and large population have contributed to its importance, its preeminence in the Indian Ocean Region and its global relevance. Its geographic barriers have contributed to its insular conception, allowing India to develop its own unique culture. Historically, it has

developed through a northwest population flow till the 18th century. It has the great advantage of being a compact landmass, with a large unindebted coastline. It has evolved with the development of river basin civilisations. Xenophobia has never been a part of India's culture, but its experience of colonisation has made it wary of foreign influences and interventions. Yet, India is a spiritual culture that has the ability to bring others into its fold.

A nation's strategic culture is its relationship with its physical and psychological environment. It is continuously evolving but it does have a core from which it grows and evolves. There are many elements that go into shaping a culture that specifically influence or shape perceptions of threat or opportunity. The main factors are its geography, history, economy, and religion. The physicality of a country or a nation, whether considered in isolation or in the context of surrounding nations or states, shapes and defines a people's perception of threat and opportunity. It also influences the evolution of core values and ideals. Strategic culture plays an important role in determining a state's behaviour and its responses to emerging threats and its policy formation.

Geographic conditions may influence or constrain the exercise of military power. The larger the area under consideration and the longer the time period involved, the more extensive does the problem become. The realities of military geography and national diplomacy tend to be summarized in the geopolitical attitudes and objectives of a nation. 41 India has a vision of South Asia as an integrated and single entity. It is based on the fact that although South Asia is divided by political boundaries, the region forms a single geographical and economic unit. It occupies a shared cultural space and a shared cultural legacy.42 India also needs to focus on the development of its border regions and jettison outdated concepts like "Inner Line" areas. Geo-politics places geography at the centre of international relations, and through it attempts to decipher fundamental factors that dictate state and foreign policy. Geography is relatively unchanging, but politics falls squarely in the human domain.

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