

Ever since the partition of 1947, India and Pakistan have been at odds over Kashmir, on India's northwest frontier. The area is inhabited by both Hindus and Muslims. Since 1949, two thirds of Kashmir has been controlled by India and the rest by Pakistan. Although the U.N. Security Council in 1948 called for a vote of the people of Kashmir to choose which country to join, such a vote was never taken. In Indian-held regions, Muslim guerrillas have been fighting against Indian rule, leading to frequent flare-ups and border wars between Pakistan and India.

Largely because of the Kashmir rivalry, both countries have been eager to build up their military might, including nuclear weapons. In May 1998, first India and then Pakistan tested nuclear devices. (India had already tested such a device in 1974.) The new tests excited pride and patriotism among both Indians and Pakistanis. But the tests alarmed leaders of other countries, who feared a nuclear arms race in the region. Summit meetings between the leaders of India and Pakistan later eased tensions.

Relations between India and Pakistan were further complicated in 1999 when military leaders took over Pakistan's government. The new ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, was seen as a strong supporter of the Muslim rebels in Indian-controlled Kashmir. He called for U.N. mediation to help settle the future of Kashmir. In the past, India has rejected outside mediation, preferring one-on-one talks with Pakistan. Such talks resumed in 2001. Tensions increased, however, when gunmen broke into India's parliament building in December 2001. The gunmen and six other people were killed. Indian leaders blamed Pakistan.

India's huge and growing population, which reached one billion in 1999, is a major cause of the nation's poverty. According to one estimate, almost a third of India's people live on less than \$1 a day. Half of India's population cannot read or write. About 70 percent of Indians are engaged in agriculture, much of it involving backbreaking, unmechanized labor.

In spite of difficulties, India has made progress in recent years. Its food output has risen sharply since the 1970s, lessening the country's need for outside aid. Life expectancy has increased from 39 to 63 years in less than half a century. And the fertility rate has declined from 6 births to 3.1 for each woman of childbearing age.

India is a democracy, but it is hard for any Indian government to make much progress given the country's poverty and its many religious and ethnic divisions. The Congress Party led India to independence and ruled for many years after that. By the 1990s, though, corruption and incompetence in the Congress Party gave other parties a chance. The Congress Party leader, Sonia Gandhi (widow of Rajiv Gandhi), was distrusted by many for her Italian birth. A major rival, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), gained popularity on a platform of Hindu nationalism and Hindu self-pride. In 1998, the BJP leader, Atal Vajpayee, became prime minister at the head of a fragile coalition of 19 parties. He retained power in national elections in 1999 with an expanded coalition of 24 parties that held a clear majority of seats in parliament.

Since the early 1990s, India has shifted away from its earlier commitment to socialism and state ownership of industry. Recent governments have encouraged private enterprise and welcomed certain types of foreign private investment. ~~But the 1990s were a period of economic stagnation and the government's failure to attract foreign investment.~~

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