

India's Troubles

India, the second most populous country in the world, faced several problems in recent years. Conflict arose in the realm of religion, and in the conduct of foreign affairs. Underlying this strife was the subcontinent's age-old problem of poverty. Dealing with these issues was made more difficult by political instability.

Controversy over religion has split Hindus and Muslims for centuries. When Britain prepared to grant independence to India in 1947, thousands died in violence between Hindus and Muslims. The subcontinent was then divided into Hindu-governed India

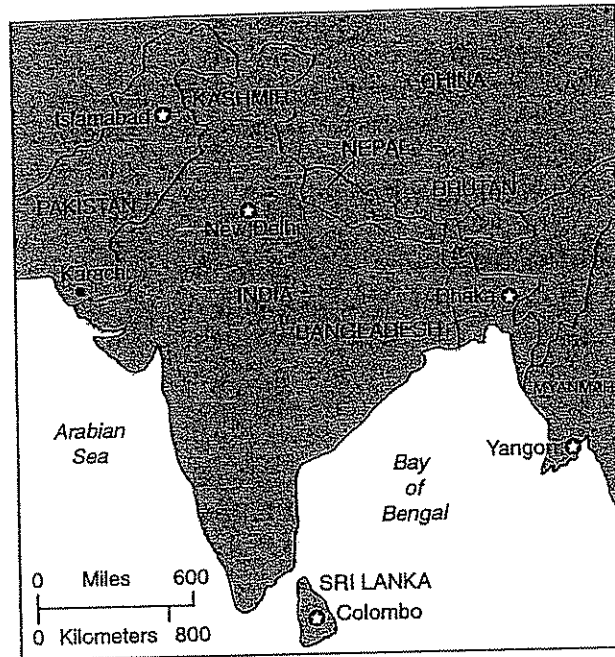


Figure 5.6 The Indian Subcontinent

and Muslim-governed Pakistan. But, with a large Muslim minority remaining in India, religious conflict did not end.

One religious crisis began in December 1992. Hindu extremists in the northern holy city of Ayodhya destroyed an ancient mosque. Hindus believe that the site on which the mosque was built was the birthplace of Lord Ram, a Hindu god. In March 1993 terrorists bombed the Bombay stock exchange. These acts of destruction touched off waves of religious violence, which spread rapidly. Riots in Bombay, Delhi, and other cities resulted in the deaths of more than 1,200. Violence also spread to Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Another source of religious conflict involved Hindus and Sikhs. (Sikhs form a distinct religious community, with beliefs that combine Hindu and Islamic elements.) Violence between the two groups broke out in Punjab state in the 1980s, sparked by Sikh secessionists. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent in troops, who, among other actions, stormed the Sikhs' holiest shrine in order to root out terrorists. In revenge, two of Gandhi's Sikh bodyguards assassinated her in 1984. (Her son Rajiv, who succeeded her, was in turn assassinated—by Tamil separatists—in 1991.)