V1 Chapter 5 Sidebar

Of Nations and World History

Our equation of modern nation-states with ancient kingdoms, empires, and regions complicates our efforts to understand the global past. The nation-state is a new phenomenon. The idea that it is natural for people to live with a group of other people who all speak the same language, share a common culture, and are ruled by members of their nation or ethnic group is an idea that really does not go back more than a couple of hundred years. Nations like Germany and Italy did not exist before the nineteenth century. Even with these nations' present boundaries, not all Germans live in Germany, and a significant proportion of the population of Italy does not speak Italian. Thus the nation-state is not only new, but also somewhat artificial.

There are currently four (more if you count some of the microstates in the Himalaya region) modern nation-states occupying the region that we are calling India in this chapter. These are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal (see Map 5.2). The biggest and most populous of these is India. These nations came into being in the middle of the twentieth century. Please note, then, that when we talk about "India" in this and subsequent chapters, until we get to the mid-twentieth century we are talking not about the modern Republic of India but about a much larger region that includes territories currently controlled by other states. The area we are calling India in this chapter is comparable to China or Europe in scale. It holds multiple states, and it is home to a diversity of languages, religions, and cultures.

At the same time, there is still a degree of cultural unity to the subcontinent. People from the nations of the subcontinent who live outside the region recognize that commonality and refer

to each other as “Deshis.” Thus a Muslim, Urdu-speaking immigrant from Pakistan who lives in New York and a Hindu, Tamil-speaking immigrant from India who lives in Toronto would identify each other as Deshis, despite their different nations of origin, languages, and religions. The word itself derives from the ancient Sanskrit word for land or country. Thus the nation called Bangladesh is Land of the Bangla (Bengali in English).

Questions for Discussion:

1. How meaningful would it be to make a distinction between domestic and international trade in the ancient world?
2. What do the peoples of South Asia have in common that makes them identify as a loose sort of group?