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The Subcontinent After Independence

Two billion people, nearly one-quarter of humanity, live on the Indian subcontinent, crowded onto only 3 percent of the world's land. The region once drew outsiders seeking its natural resources. Today, India is one of the world's largest economies, and both India and Bangladesh have become major manufacturing centers.

Global Economic Powerhouses

Life has improved for hundreds of millions across the subcontinent. Despite persistent poverty, health care, education, and electricity now reach areas that once lacked them. In Bangladesh, life expectancy has risen from under 50 years at independence to over 74. Economic growth in Bangladesh has helped drive these changes. Factories that once produced for local markets now make clothing sold around the world. Bangladesh exports tens of billions of dollars in clothing each year.

India has a large population of educated, English-speaking workers, making it a global center for technology, medicine, and finance. American and European companies employ millions of Indian workers, while Indian companies compete globally. Nations Europeans once conquered for wealth are now becoming global economic powerhouses.

A Common Language

India has hundreds of languages, but Hindi has become common across much of the nation. After independence, the government promoted Hindi, hoping to unite its diverse people. The effort met strong resistance, particularly in southern India, and the country never adopted a national language. Still, Hindi continued to spread.

India's enormous Hindi-language film industry, nicknamed "Bollywood, helped spread Hindi where government policy could not. It produces action-packed musicals with mass appeal. Popular films and songs reached audiences far beyond India's Hindi-speaking regions. Later, television and online media carried Hindi into millions more homes. Indians did not have to give up their local languages to learn Hindi. Instead, popular culture gave people across much of India a language they could share. Hindi's widespread use today hides an important debate that began at independence.

Gandhi and Nehru's Great Debate

Mahatma Gandhi believed that after independence, Indians should build their nation around self-sufficient villages, raising their own food and spinning and weaving their own clothing. Gandhi distrusted industrialization, but India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, disagreed.

Nehru wanted India to become a modern industrial nation. During his seventeen years in office, the government built huge dams, steel mills, power plants, and factories. Nehru believed that science, technology, and industry could lift hundreds of millions of Indians out of poverty.

India mostly chose Nehru's path. Instead of building its economy around self-sufficient villages, India built cities, universities, factories, power plants, and modern transportation. Today, India produces automobiles, medicines, satellites, and software, becoming one of the world's largest economies. Gandhi remains one of India's most revered figures, but modern India looks far more like the nation Nehru imagined.

A Nuclear Threat

India's hostile relationship with Pakistan has continued since the two nations gained independence in 1947. They have fought several wars, mostly over the disputed region of Kashmir. In 1998, India conducted a series of nuclear weapons tests. Pakistan responded with its own tests seventeen days later, making clear that both nations possessed nuclear weapons.

Nuclear weapons did not end the conflict. India and Pakistan fought again in 1999, and tensions over Kashmir have repeatedly brought both powers close to war. In May 2025, the two nations exchanged missiles, drones, and artillery during four days of fighting. A future escalation into nuclear war remains a serious global threat.

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Fill in the Blanks

Since i__d__p__n__en__e, the Indian subcontinent has experienced enormous change. India and Bangladesh have become major m__n__f__c__u__i__g centers, while improvements in h__a__th care, e__u__a__i__n, and e__e__t__i__i__y have helped millions of subcontinentals live l__n__er and h__a__t__i__r lives. India has also become a global center for t__c__n__l__gy, medicine, and f__n__n__e. The Indian g__v__r__m__nt promoted H__n__i as a c__m__on language, but r__s__s__a__ce prevented it from becoming the nation's only official l__n__u__ge. B__l__y__o__d and other popular media helped Hindi spread instead. India also mostly chose Jawaharlal N__h__u's vision of an i__d__s__r__al nation over Mahatma G__n__h__'s preference for self-sufficient v__l__a__es. Factories, u__i__e__s__t__es, power plants, and modern c__t__es followed. Independence did not bring p__a__e with P__k__s__an, however. The two nations have fought repeatedly over K__s__m__r, and both possess n__c__e__r weapons, making another conflict between them a global t__r__at.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. According to the text, what facts allowed India to become "a global center for technology, medicine, and finance?"

2. The government promoted Hindi after independence, but the effort met strong resistance. What helped Hindi spread across much of India anyway?

★3. Compare Mahatma Gandhi's vision for India with the vision of Jawaharlal Nehru.

★4. Why is the conflict between India and Pakistan a concern for nations beyond the subcontinent?

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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