CHAPTER 2

India and Her Neighbours

Our destinies are inextricably tied together. What affects one nation affects the rest of us.

— Nelson Mandela (1995)

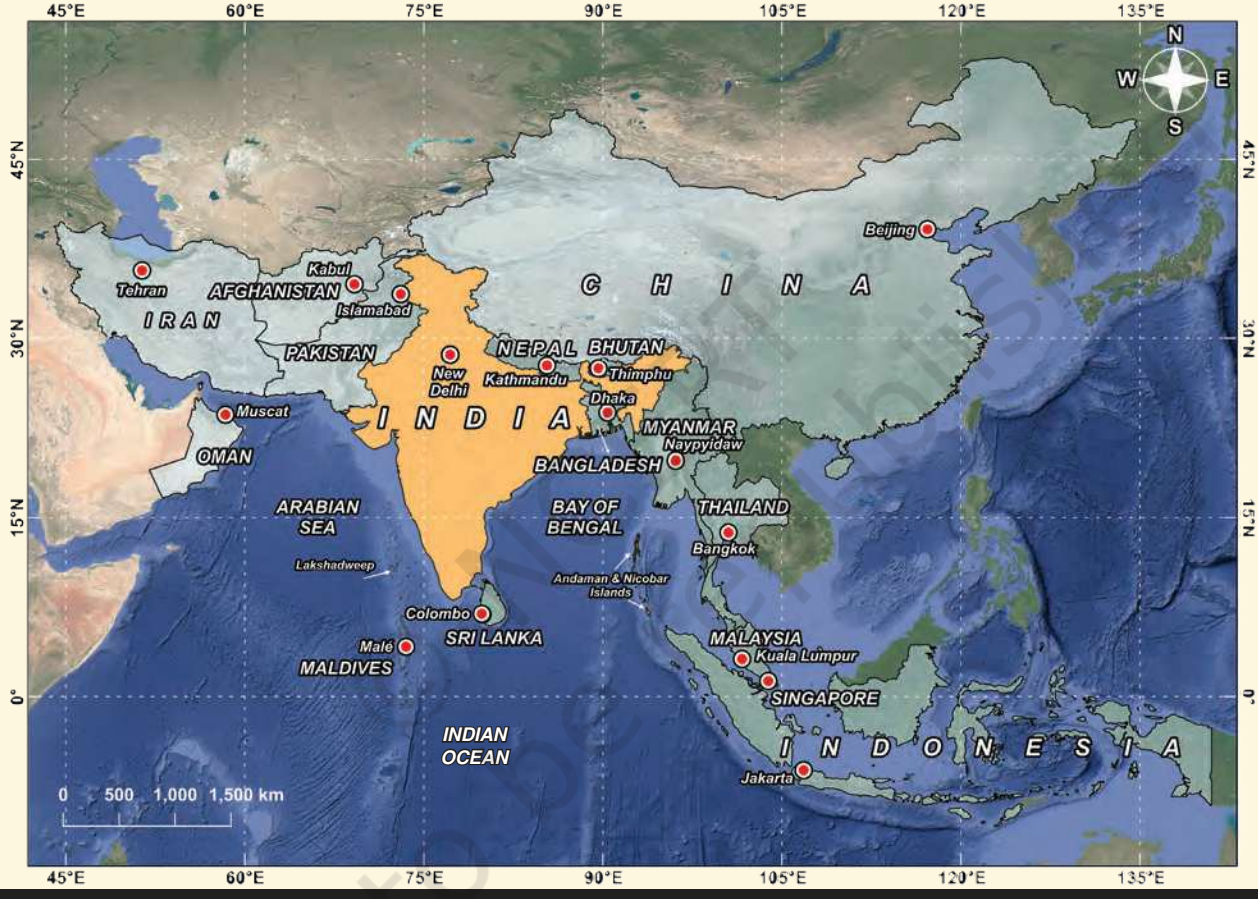


Fig. 2.1. India and some of her neighbours

The Big Questions

1. *What defines a 'neighbour'? Is it just shared land borders?*
2. *How do geography and history influence the nature of India's relationships with her neighbours?*
3. *In what ways are India and her neighbours interconnected today?*

0782CH02

© NCERT not to be republished

Framing the Neighbourhood

When we think of a neighbour, we often imagine a country that shares a land boundary with us. That is the traditional view of neighbourhood. In that sense, Pakistan and Afghanistan in the northwest, China's region of Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan in the north, and Bangladesh and Myanmar in the east are indeed our neighbours. India's total land boundary stretches over 15,100 km and passes through diverse landscapes, including deserts, plains, forests, mountains, marshes, and river valleys.

India, however, has always been a maritime nation, surrounded by the sea on three sides. This makes Sri Lanka and the Maldives our immediate neighbours across the waters. But if we look at India from a high-altitude satellite, we can also see that nations like Iran, Oman, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia are part of our maritime neighbourhood. In this chapter, we use this understanding of a wider neighbourhood to situate India's central and strategic place in South Asia (Fig. 2.1).



DON'T MISS OUT

Who is a **maritime neighbour**?

A maritime neighbour is a country connected to another by a shared sea or ocean, even without a direct land border. *(Revisit the chapter 'Oceans and Continents' in your Grade 6 textbook.)* The ocean acts as a vital link, facilitating centuries of trade, cultural exchange, and historical ties. In this chapter, we will visit only the maritime neighbours nearest to India.



LET'S EXPLORE

Identify the three large water bodies that surround India in the map on the facing page (Fig.2.2).

© NCERT not to be republished

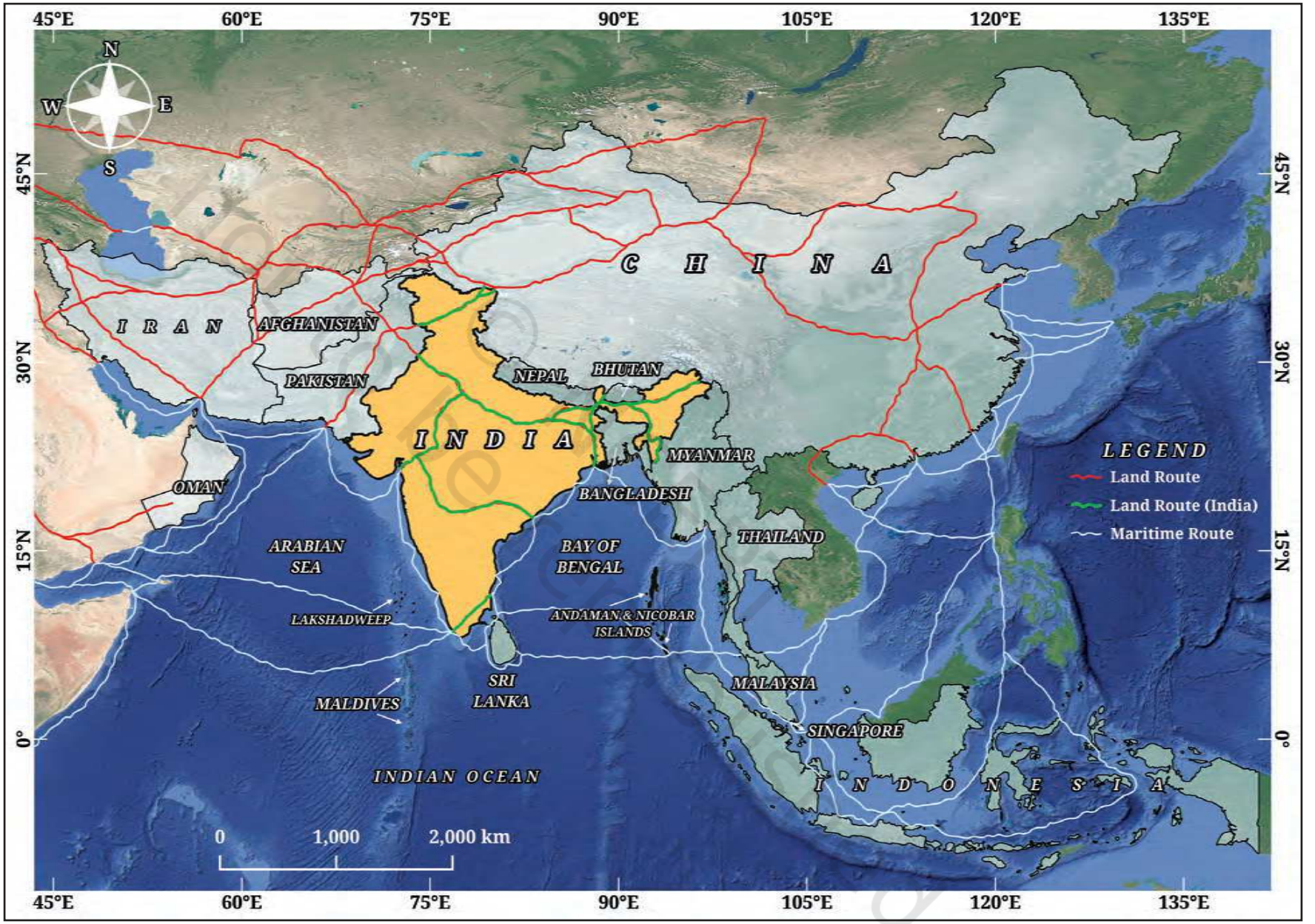


Fig. 2.2. A simplified map of the major land and sea routes that have connected India with many regions and countries of Eurasia and Africa over the centuries. (The routes shown here are approximate and fluctuated in time.)



DON'T MISS OUT

The Indian Ocean is the third-largest ocean in the world and is a busy route where half of the world's container ships, one third of the bulk cargo, and two-thirds of the world's oil are transported. This ocean connects many countries, which are home to around 2.7 billion people.

With a long coastline of approximately 11,100 km, India holds a unique maritime position. Her peninsular shape extends deep into the Indian Ocean — a location that provides India with access to important sea routes, making her a vital link between Southeast Asia, West Asia, and Africa. This has allowed India to play a key role in trade and regional cooperation. India's ports serve as gateways for imports and exports, and her central position helps in providing timely humanitarian aid and disaster relief in the region.

Such involvement is called **regionalism** and helps create peace, stability, and shared progress. It teaches us that being good neighbours is not just about borders, but also about working together for the benefit of everyone in the region. See the map in Fig. 2.2 to get a sense of the dense networks of land and sea routes connecting India with many regions in this part of the world.

India and Her Land-based Neighbours

India and her largest neighbour

Since 1950, India and **China**, two of Asia's largest and most influential nations, have shared a long and strategic relationship shaped by history, geography, culture, trade, and politics. Separated by the Himalayas, their border stretches (from east to west) across the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and the Union Territory of Ladakh.

Culturally, Buddhism is a powerful link between the two countries. Originating in India, it reached China around the 1st century CE via trade and pilgrimage routes. A few centuries later, Chinese monks like Faxian and Xuanzang travelled to Indian centres of

© NCERT not to be republished

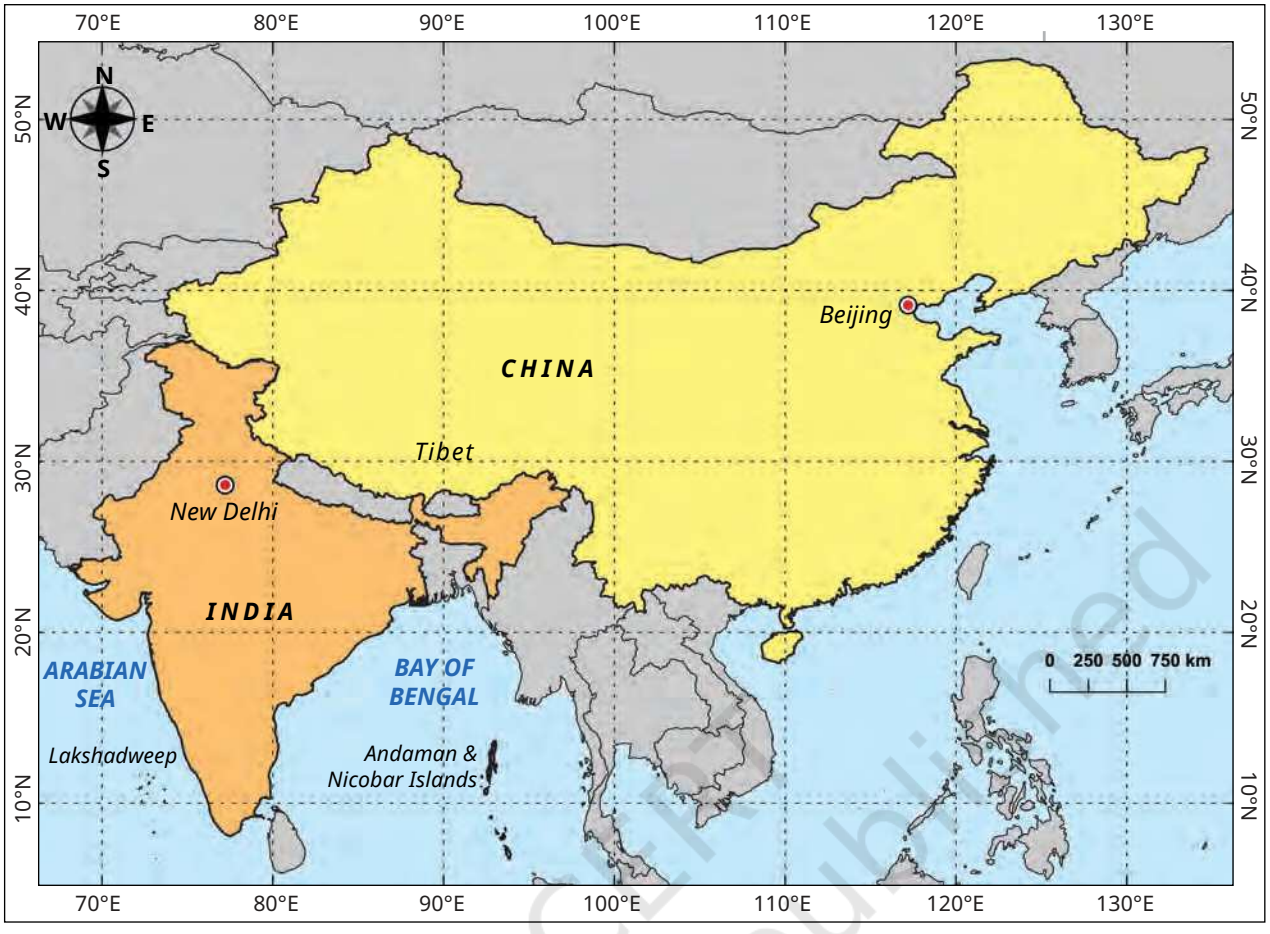


Fig. 2.3. India and China. (Note that China is approximately three times larger than India in area.)

learning, while Indian monks such as Bodhidharma, Dharmakṣhema and Kumārajīva carried Buddhist teachings to China, creating deep spiritual and intellectual ties.



DON'T MISS OUT

In the 13th century, Hindu merchants built temples in the Chinese port city of Quanzhou, an important trading centre. At the Kaiyuan temple, pillars depict carvings of Viṣhṇu, Śhiva, and stories from the Rāmāyaṇa and the Purāṇas.



Fig. 2.4. 'Gajendra mokṣham' or the story of Viṣhṇu rescuing the elephant from a crocodile, carved on a pillar at the Kaiyuan temple

© NCERT not to be republished

India's trade relationship with China continues till date. In 2024-2025, India's chief exports to China were iron ore, chemicals, and cotton yarn; the imports include electronic items (including mobile phones, computer hardware, etc.), and a variety of industrial equipment. Several Indian companies have set up operations in China and vice versa. However, the balance of trade is currently much in China's favour, since her exports to India are worth about eight times more than India's exports to China.

Recent years have also seen phases of heightened tensions, mostly related to their shared borders, and a few serious conflicts, some of which you will encounter in higher classes. On the other hand, efforts are being made to resolve disputes through trade, dialogue and border resolution mechanisms.

India and Pakistan

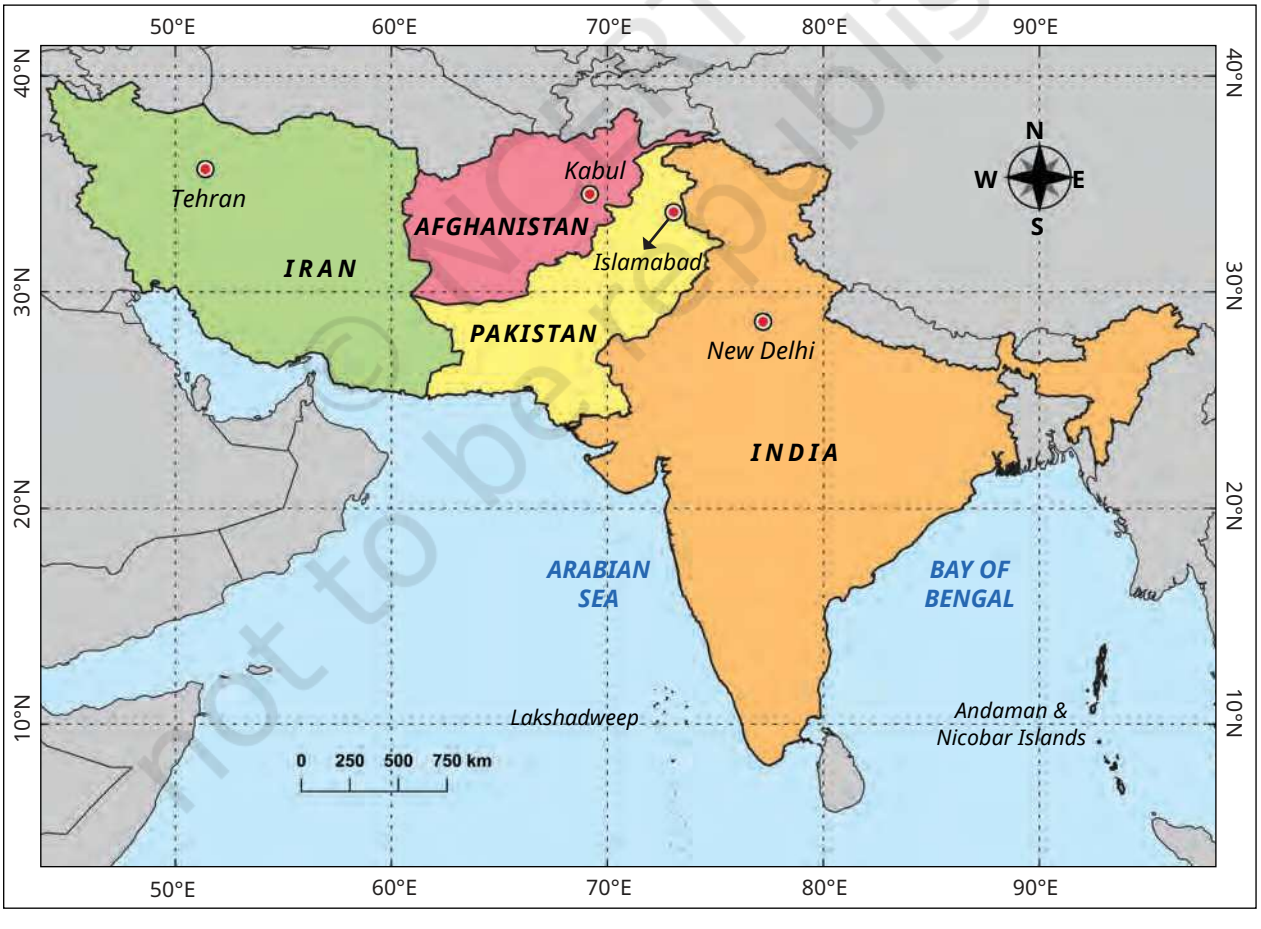


Fig. 2.5. India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran

© NCERT not to be republished

Before the 1947 Partition — a legacy of the colonial era that continues to shape the present — **Pakistan** was a part of India. Let us note for now that Pakistan was founded on a religious basis, unlike India; this will be explored further in Grade 8. Suffice to say that these nations share one of the most complex relationships in South Asia. Since the Partition, several military conflicts and wars, including wars in 1948, 1965 and 1971, and full-scale conflicts like the Kargil War in 1999, have defined an ongoing tension. In particular, frequent terrorist attacks launched against India with the support of the Pakistan army have prevented normal relations between the two countries.

The border between the two nations stretches across the Indian states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Punjab, and the union territories of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh (Fig. 2.5). It is not just a geographical line, but also a symbol of shared heritage as well as a tragically divided history.

This tumultuous journey has also been marked by attempts at peace, such as periods of trade and the opening of pilgrimage routes for Hindu or Sikh pilgrims — religious and cultural landmarks of a shared past that lives on. The Katas Raj temple complex in Pakistan's Punjab is one such example, linked to the Mahābhārata and containing a sacred pond. Other examples include several ancient Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh shrines, such as the Hinglaj Mata Mandir in Balochistan. Besides, languages, cuisines, music, and festivals continue to bridge the border.



DON'T MISS OUT

The Kartarpur Corridor is a visa-free border crossing between India and Pakistan, created to allow Indian pilgrims to visit the Gurdwara Darbar Sahib in Kartarpur, Pakistan (Fig. 2.6). Pilgrims using the corridor do not need a visa, only a permit, which makes it easier for thousands of people to visit the gurdwara. This gurdwara holds great religious significance as it is the final resting place of Guru Nānak Dev, the founder of Sikhism, who spent the last 18 years of his life there.

© NCERT not to be republished

For decades, Indian devotees could only view this holy site from a distance, using binoculars set up near the border at Dera Baba Nanak in Punjab. The idea for a corridor was first proposed in the 1990s but only became a reality in 2019, when the corridor was officially opened to mark Guru Nānak's 550th birth anniversary.

Can the Kartarpur Corridor be a model for the possible progress of peace and dialogue?



Fig. 2.6. A view of the Kartarpur Sahib Gurdwara

A newborn neighbour

India and Bangladesh have an enduring relationship shaped by a common history, culture and language. 'History' because, as we will see in higher grades, **Bangladesh** (which was 'East Pakistan' earlier) was born in 1971 as the outcome of a war between India and Pakistan; and 'language' because Bangla is a language common to Bangladesh and India's state of West Bengal.

The land border between the two countries (Fig. 2.7) is even longer than India's border with China; it runs along the Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram. India and Bangladesh also share several transboundary river systems originating from the Ganga and the Brahmaputra. The rivers play a major role in agriculture, fisheries, transportation, and the livelihoods of millions of people in both countries.

© NCERT not to be republished

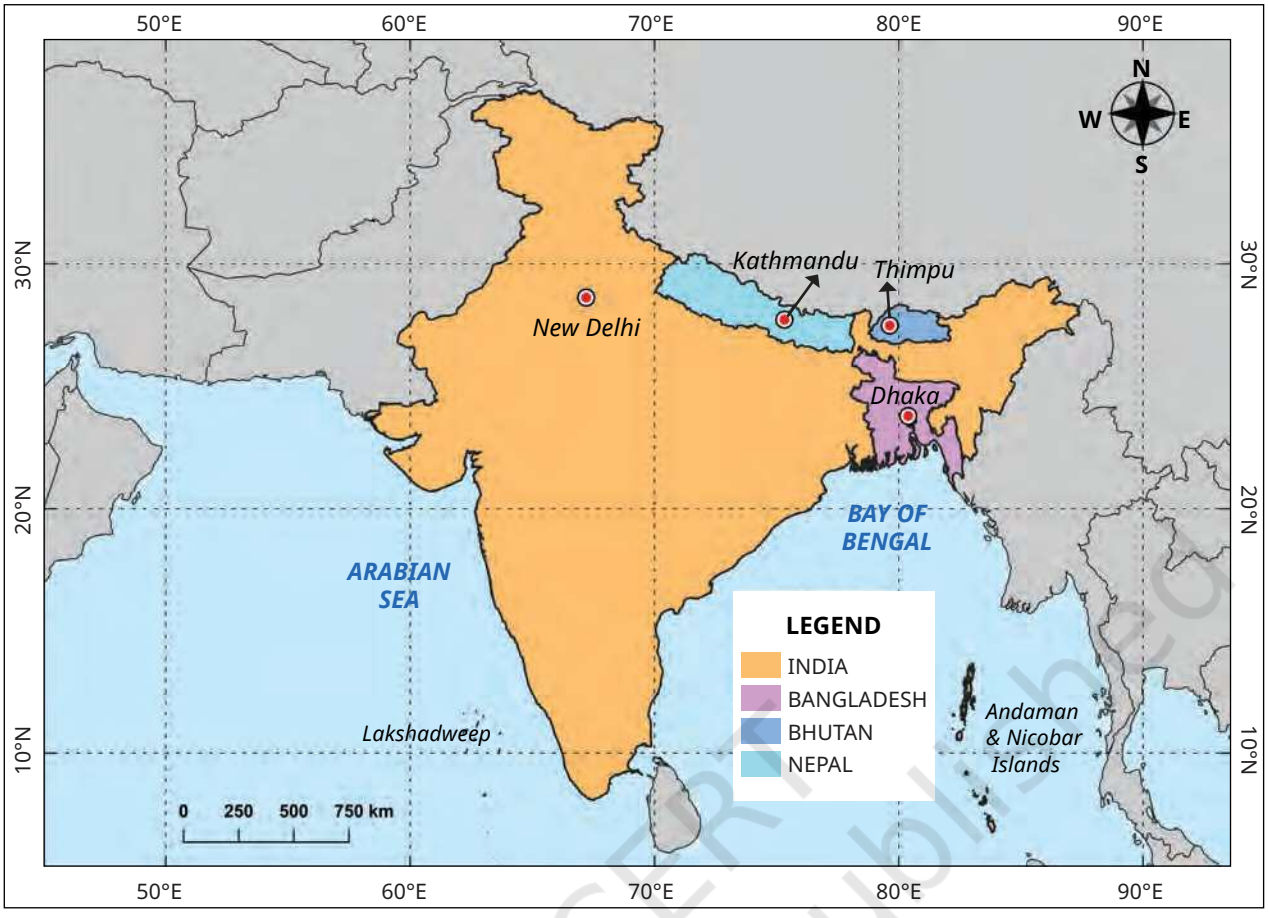


Fig. 2.7. India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan

India and Bangladesh have built on their historical ties through strong diplomatic, economic, strategic and cultural cooperation, making their relationship one of the most important in South Asia.

The two countries also share a coastline, and therefore a maritime environment. The Sundarban National Park (Fig. 2.8) is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with its protection and management coordinated by the two neighbours. A home to the Bengal tiger and many other species, it is important in terms of biodiversity, as well as climate



Fig. 2.8. A view of the largest mangrove forest of the world, in the Sundarban National Park. About two-thirds of the forest lies in Bangladesh and the rest in India.

© NCERT not to be republished

resilience since it serves as a barrier to cyclones. However, because of global warming and climate change, experts predict that Bangladesh will have to face the impact of rising sea levels and increasingly intense cyclones in coming years. Many people are likely to lose their homes or see their livelihoods affected.

In the lap of the Himalayas

Nestled in the lap of the Himalayas, **Nepal** shares a long and open border with India, stretching across the Indian states of Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, and Sikkim (Fig. 2.7). This geographical proximity has allowed for centuries of interaction and cooperation between the two nations and the relationship is marked by shared heritage, spiritual linkages, cross-border movement, and political partnerships.

Culturally, the ties between India and Nepal are profound. Pilgrims from both countries regularly visit sacred sites across the border. The Paśhupatinātha temple in Kathmandu (Fig. 2.9),

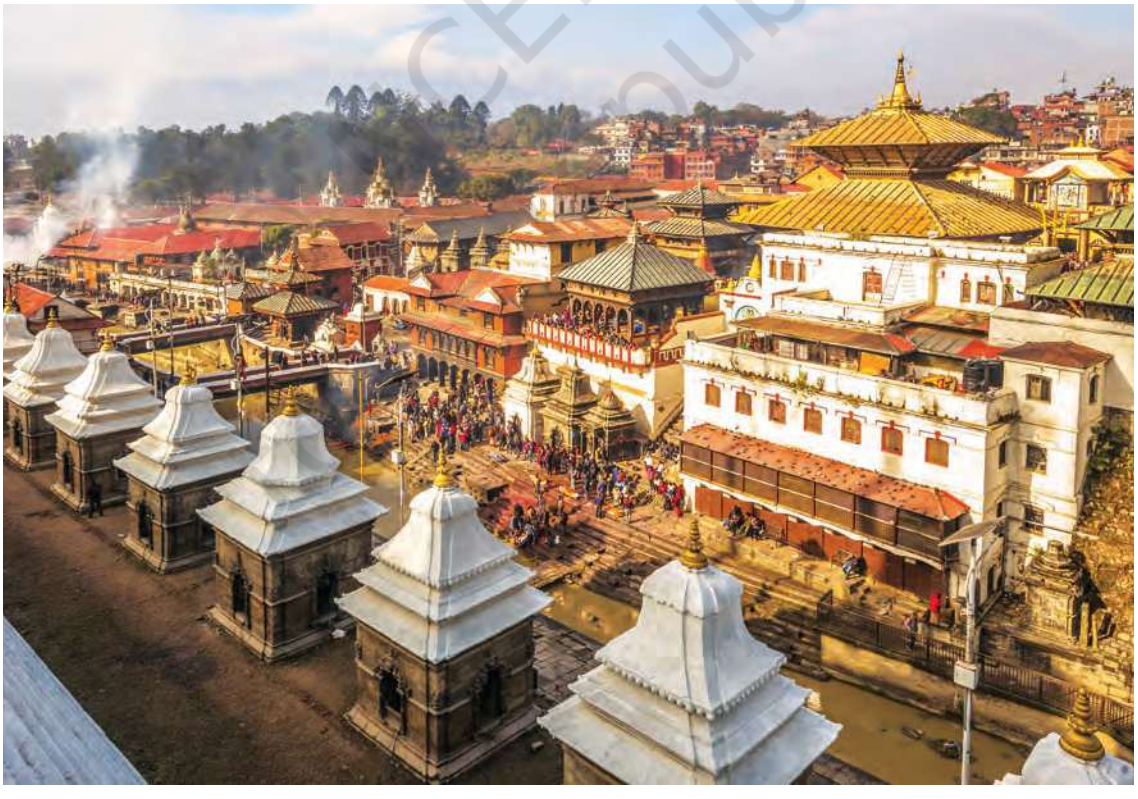


Fig. 2.9. The Paśhupatinātha Temple, Kathmandu, where Śhiva is worshipped as the protector of animals

© NCERT not to be republished

a major Hindu pilgrimage destination, draws thousands of Indian visitors every year. Festivals such as Daśhain (Daśhaharā), Tihar (Dīpāvalī), and Holi are observed with equal enthusiasm in both countries. These shared spiritual traditions strengthen the people-to-people bonds and reflect a rich tapestry of mutual cultural appreciation.

On the political front, India and Nepal have maintained close diplomatic relations, largely shaped by the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship. This treaty provides for open borders, free movement of people and goods, and cooperation in areas such as defence and foreign policy. Cross-border migration and trade form another vital component of the India-Nepal relationship. The open border policy allows citizens to cross freely without passports or visas, enabling people from both sides to access education, healthcare, employment, and maintain family connections. Daily life in many border towns reflects this close interdependence, with vibrant markets and thriving trade.

India is Nepal's largest trading partner, supplying essential goods such as petroleum, medicines, food items, and manufactured products. In return, Nepal exports agricultural produce, handicrafts, and garments. These exchanges not only contribute to economic development but also reinforce the social and economic integration of the border communities. The India-Nepal relationship stands as a unique example of neighbourhood cooperation shaped by a shared history, faith, geography, and a commitment to regional harmony.



DON'T MISS OUT

What is an 'open border'? It is when people from two countries can travel across the border without a visa or passport. This enables families living on both sides to stay connected, and people to move easily for work, education, trade, or religious visits. However, India and Nepal work together to ensure the open border remains safe and is not misused; it is a symbol of trust and friendship between the two countries.

© NCERT not to be republished

The 'Land of the Thunder Dragon'

Bhutan, called 'Drukyul' or 'Land of the Thunder Dragon' by its inhabitants, is a small, landlocked Himalayan kingdom nestled between India and China. Bhutan's border with India touches the states of Sikkim, West Bengal, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh (see Fig. 2.7). Over centuries, Bhutan has developed strong economic and cultural links with India.



DON'T MISS OUT



Several important rivers originate in Bhutan and flow into India; they are not only vital for agriculture but also serve as the foundation for hydroelectric power generation, which is one of the most significant areas of bilateral cooperation. Some major power plants contribute to Bhutan's economic growth and also supply renewable energy to India.

Fig. 2.10. The emblem of Bhutan. Notice the dragons that symbolise the 'Land of the Thunder Dragon'. What other elements look familiar?



Fig. 2.11. The Tala Hydroelectric Project, built with support from India, being dedicated to the peoples of Bhutan and India by the two countries' respective prime ministers in 2008.

Cultural and religious ties further strengthen the bond between the two nations. Rooted in the shared heritage of Buddhism, Bhutan and India maintain deep spiritual connections. Bhutanese pilgrims frequently visit sacred Buddhist sites in India, such as Bodh Gaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, Udayagiri, and Sikkim. The influence of Indian Buddhist masters such as Guru Padmasambhava (Guru

© NCERT not to be republished

Rinpoche), who introduced the Vajrayāna school of Buddhism to Bhutan in the 8th century CE, remains central to Bhutan's religious identity. Indeed the dragon found on Bhutan's emblem (Fig. 2.10) and flag is said to symbolise the 'the thunderous voice of the Buddha's teachings'.

The relationship between India and Bhutan is marked by mutual respect, strategic cooperation, and cultural affinity. Their partnership exemplifies how shared geography, spiritual heritage, and economic collaboration can foster long-lasting and peaceful regional ties.



DON'T MISS OUT

Three main schools of Buddhism grew in ancient India and migrated to many of her neighbours:

- → **Theravāda**, or the 'School of the Elders', took shape around the 3rd century BCE. It is considered closest to the Buddha's original teachings and today has followers mainly in Sri Lanka and in Southeast Asia, especially Thailand and Myanmar.
- → **Mahāyāna** or the 'Great Vehicle' came into being around the 1st century BCE, incorporating new ideas and practices, such as a belief that the Buddha had a divine nature and could guide people in many forms. This school travelled to several countries, including China, Japan and Korea, where several sub-schools (including Zen Buddhism) emerged on the way.
- → **Vajrayāna**, or the 'Diamond Vehicle', also generally known as 'Tantric Buddhism', arose around the 6th century CE as an extension of Mahāyāna. It emphasised special techniques and secret teachings such as the use of mantras, mandalas (sacred diagrams), and visualisations of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas. Tibetan Buddhism derived from this school around the 7th century CE.

Even today, these three schools of Buddhism are still followed in some parts of India, especially in the Himalayan states.

© NCERT not to be republished

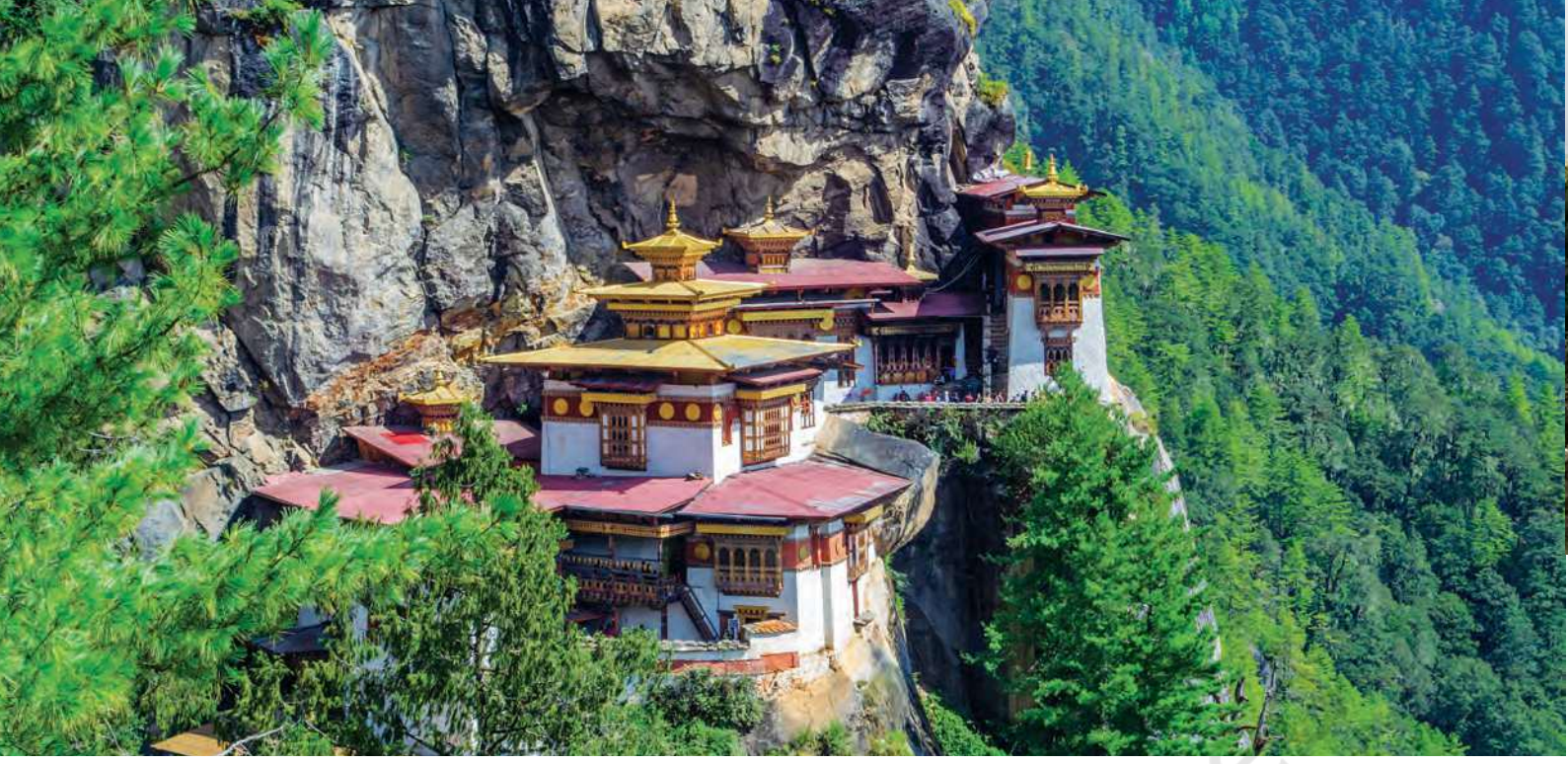


Fig. 2.12. 'Tiger's nest', a Buddhist monastery perched high on the mountainside overhanging the Paro valley, Bhutan



DON'T MISS OUT

Bhutan developed the concept of Gross National Happiness Index as a more holistic measure of their nation's progress compared with prevailing concepts like Gross Domestic Product. This includes ideas of sustainability, good governance and the promotion of culture, among others. The country assesses its progress periodically based on this index.

India's gateway to Southeast Asia

India and **Myanmar** (earlier known as 'Burma') share a long-standing relationship grounded in historical, ethnic, and cultural connections, despite periods of political turmoil. As the birthplace of Buddhism, India holds special spiritual significance for the people of Myanmar, many of whom visit India during pilgrimages. The two countries are connected by a land border as well as a maritime boundary in the Bay of Bengal (Fig. 2.20). India's northeastern states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram share borders with Myanmar, facilitating cross-border interaction and cooperation. These ties form the basis for sustained cultural exchanges and regional connectivity initiatives between the two nations.

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.13. Myanmar on the left and India (Mizoram) on the right bank of Tio River. The river forms part of the international boundary between the two countries (picture taken in 2008).

Myanmar is also India's gateway to Southeast Asia. The Land Border Crossing Agreement of 2018 between India and Myanmar eased cross-border movement for people living in border areas, boosted trade, enhanced connectivity, and deepened people-to-people ties, especially between India's northeast and Myanmar. Over the past couple of years, however, some restrictions have been placed on the free movement across the land border on account of conflicts in these areas.



DON'T MISS OUT



Fig. 2.14. The Ananda temple, Bagan

A few years ago, India helped restore the Ananda temple in Bagan, among others, that had been damaged by earthquakes. India also gifted a 16-foot replica of the Sarnath statue of the Buddha to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, Myanmar.

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.15. National Highway 1, Afghanistan, from Zaranj to Delaram; it connects to the Asian Highway Network 1 (AH 1). Parts of NH 44 in India are also part of AH 1.

A land-locked neighbour

Afghanistan, a multiethnic landlocked country in south-central Asia, once shared a direct land border with India. However, the creation of Pakistan in 1947 has complicated access between the two countries (Fig. 2.5). Despite these geopolitical challenges, India and Afghanistan have, by and large, maintained close and friendly ties rooted in shared history and culture, besides significant strategic interests.

Their connection dates back to ancient times, when the historic Uttarāpatha trade route linked the Ganga plains to Central Asia via Afghanistan, fostering centuries of exchange in goods, religion, and ideas. Stretching from Gandhāra (modern Kandahar) through major Indian cities like Takṣhaśhilā, Varanasi, and Pāṭaliputra, this cultural superhighway enabled the flow of Buddhism, Hinduism, art, and philosophy.

Before the spread of Islam in the 7th century CE, Afghanistan was a thriving centre of Buddhist and Hindu culture. Kingdoms like Kapiśha and Zābul mirrored Indian systems of governance. The gigantic Buddhas of Bamiyan, carved into Afghan cliffs, stood as powerful symbols of Mahāyāna Buddhism's reach from India, reflecting the deep civilisational ties between the two regions; sadly, they were destroyed in 2001.

© NCERT not to be republished

In recent decades, India and Afghanistan have continued to share strong people-to-people ties. India has supported education, healthcare, and infrastructure development in Afghanistan, including the construction of the Afghan Parliament building and the Zaranj-Delaram highway. These initiatives, despite ups and downs, reflect a wish to build on the long-shared history of friendship and mutual respect.

India's Maritime Neighbours

From a few centuries BCE, Indian traders were sailing to Southeast Asian countries in search of gold and other valuable resources. They frequently visited the islands of Java, Sumatra, and Malaya, so much so that these places came to be known as 'Suvarṇabhūmi' (the 'golden land') or 'Suvarṇadvīpa' (the 'golden island'). But let us start closer to home.



DON'T MISS OUT

Many nations in India's neighbourhood came together in 1985 to form an association called SAARC — the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation — in order to promote mutual interests, sociocultural and economic progress.

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka are members. SAARC aims to share resources around development in science, education, health, and other areas. However, political tensions among some members have often disrupted its functioning.

Several more such regional groups of nations centred on the Indian Ocean exist for other specific purposes.

India's nearest maritime neighbour

Sri Lanka is an island nation located to the southeast of India, with the two countries divided by a narrow stretch of sea known as the Palk Strait. At its nearest point, the distance between the two countries is only about 32 km, making them close maritime neighbours with a long history of cultural contact, trade, and

© NCERT not to be republished

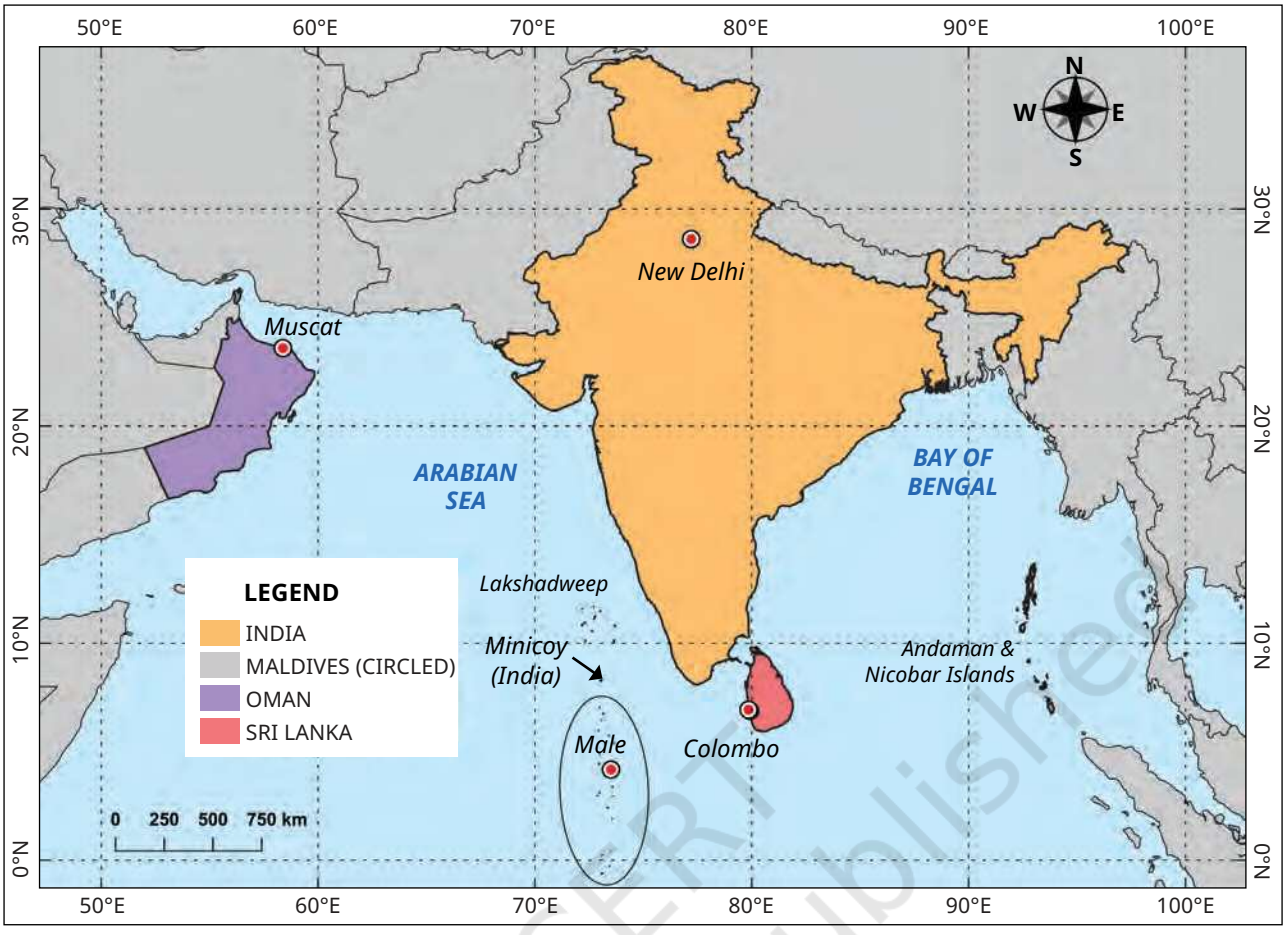


Fig. 2.16. India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives (circled) and Oman

cooperation. Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE by Mahendra and Sanghamitrā, the son and the daughter of Emperor Aśhoka. Hinduism also travelled there, notably through its two Epics. Even now, both countries continue to celebrate this shared spiritual and cultural heritage.

However, the relationship has not always been smooth. One difficult time was during Sri Lanka's civil war from the mid-1980s to around 2010. The war was mainly between the Sinhalese majority (whose language is Sinhala) and the Tamil minority, which has close cultural ties to India. Because of the fighting, many Tamil families had to leave Sri Lanka and move to south India, especially Tamil Nadu.

India and Sri Lanka share a multidimensional partnership that combines cultural closeness, historical ties, economic cooperation, and strategic collaboration. The relationship continues to grow through people-to-people exchanges, regional groupings and shared goals for peace and development in South Asia.

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.17. Traditional fishermen at sunset in Sri Lanka, standing on stilts



Fig. 2.18. Brightly coloured traditional wooden masks of Sri Lanka; this tradition may have connections with similar mask-making traditions in India, particularly from south India.

A nation of islets

India and **the Maldives** share a close relationship based on geography, history, and culture. The Maldives, which consists of over 1,100 islets (or small islands), is only about 130 km from Minicoy (an Indian island part of the Union Territory of Lakshadweep), making it an important neighbour, especially for trade and security in the Indian Ocean (Figs. 2.16 and 2.20).

© NCERT not to be republished

The two countries share centuries-old cultural ties shaped by maritime trade. Buddhism travelled to the Maldives early on, as established by archaeological finds of ancient Buddhist temples and inscriptions. Influences from Tamil Nadu and Kerala brought language, cuisine, and arts to the islands. Maldivian dishes like coconut curries and *roshi* reflect South Indian flavours, while the Boduberu dance echoes Tamil folk rhythms. Dhivehi (the official language of the Maldives, also called Maldivian) vocabulary and boat-building techniques also show South Indian roots.

India was one of the first countries to recognise the Maldives after it became independent in 1965. Over the years, the two nations have built strong ties in many areas, including defence, trade, and disaster relief. India's quick help during the 2004 tsunami, the 2014 water crisis in Malé (the Maldives' capital), and the COVID-19 pandemic further strengthened this bond. These actions highlighted India's ability to respond quickly in times of crisis and further reinforced her role as the region's trusted first responder.



DON'T MISS OUT

Dhivehi, the language of the Maldives, is a vibrant blend shaped by centuries of contact with Indian cultures. It borrows words from Sanskrit, Prakrit, Tamil, Malayalam, and Hindi. *Raajje* (king) and *mas* (fish) echo Sanskrit words *rājā* and *matsya*, while *dhoni* (boat) and *kukulhu* (chicken) share roots with Tamil and Malayalam. Modern Hindi words like *filmu* have entered everyday use, thanks to Bollywood. Dhīvehī reflects the Maldives' rich history as a maritime hub shaped by Indian linguistic and cultural influences.

As an island nation, the Maldives is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change, including a rise in sea level which could reach 1 metre by the end of the century, partly submerging many of its islands.

This nation is a member of the International Solar Alliance, an Indian initiative (we will revisit this in Grade 8), which shares research technology on solar energy. This joint effort towards

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.19. (Left) A satellite view of the main islands of the Maldives (notice the faint outlines), with India's southern tip visible in the top right corner. (Right) To draw attention to the danger of rising sea levels owing to global warming, the Maldives' president and cabinet of ministers held in 2009 a meeting underwater, at a depth of 4 m below the surface.

sustainability is another example of the long-term relationship between the two countries.

From Dvārakā to Dvāravatī and Ayodhyā to Ayutthayā

India and **Thailand** are closely linked through maritime routes and regional geography. Sharing a maritime boundary (Fig. 2.20), the two countries have been connected since ancient times through trade and cultural exchange. As early as the 3rd century BCE, Indian traders and scholars sailed to what is now Thailand, exchanging goods such as spices and textiles, while also bringing religious and cultural ideas that would deeply influence the region.

Indeed, the impact of Indian culture is reflected in the names of later Thai kingdoms. The Dvāravatī culture, which flourished from the 6th to the 11th centuries CE, derived its name from a Sanskrit word for 'that which has gates', directly referencing Dvārakā, Kṛiṣhṇa's city described in the Mahābhārata. Much later, the Ayutthayā Kingdom, founded in 1351, was named after the

© NCERT not to be republished

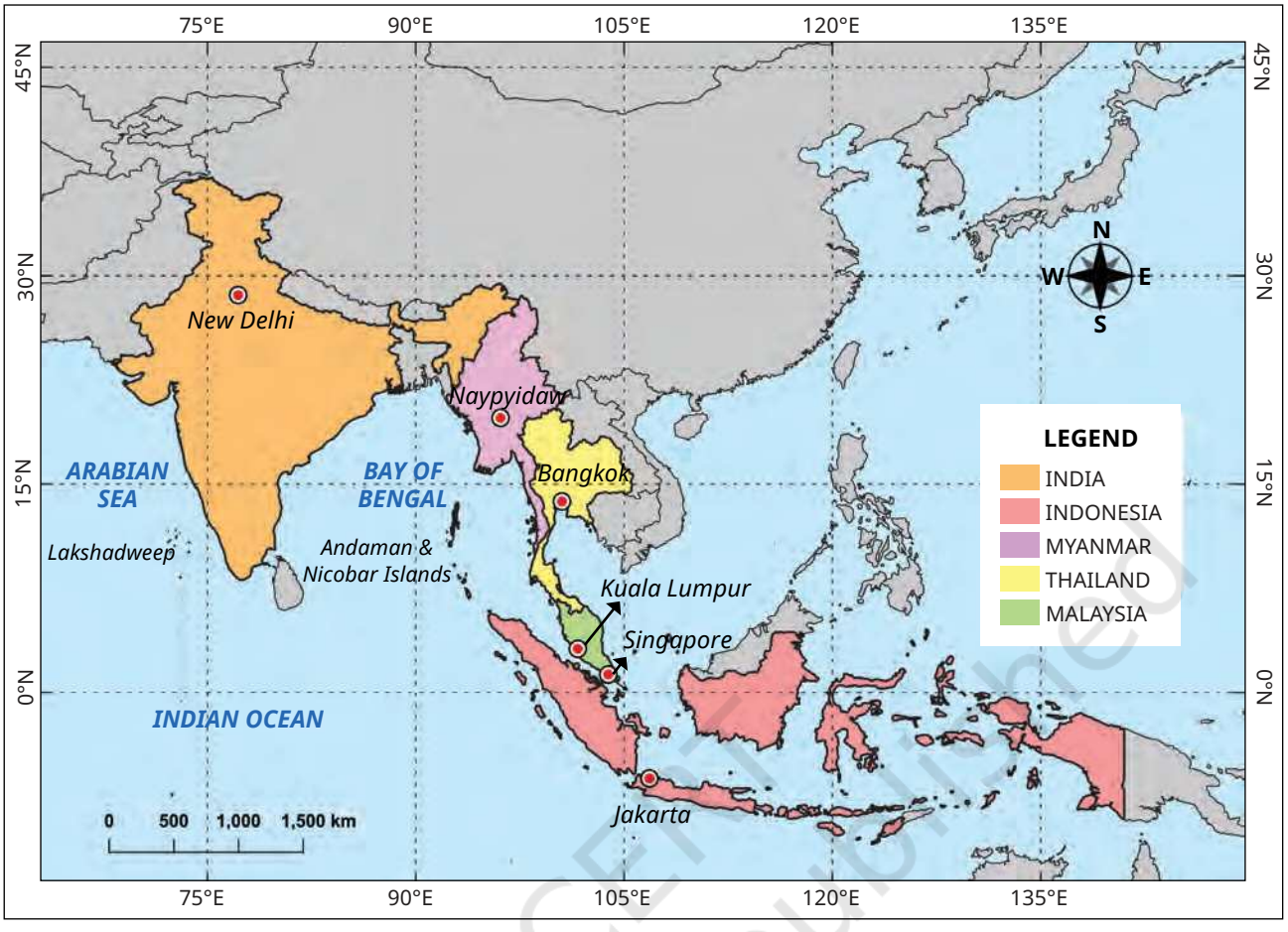


Fig. 2.20. India, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia

ancient Indian city of Ayodhyā, the birthplace of Rāma according to the Rāmāyaṇa. This choice of place names reflecting Indian traditions illustrates the profound impact of Indian civilisation on Thailand's history and culture.



DON'T MISS OUT

Monarchs of the current Chakri dynasty have all been named after Rāma; the current king, for instance, is Rama X (that is, the tenth King Rama in this dynasty).

Cultural ties were further strengthened by the shared heritage of Buddhism and Hinduism. Indian monks, scholars and texts played a central role in shaping the religious and philosophical foundations of Thai society. Theravāda Buddhism is widely practised there, while Hindu deities and stories from Indian epics

© NCERT not to be republished

are also integrated into Thai royal ceremonies, dance forms and literature.

LET'S EXPLORE



Fig. 2.21. A massive sculpture at Bangkok airport

The scene in Fig. 2.21 depicts the well-known Hindu myth of *samudra manthana* or the churning of the ocean. The devas (gods, on the right here) and the asuras (demons, on the left) decided to join forces to churn the cosmic ocean in search of *amrita* or the nectar of immortality, with the serpent Vāsuki as the churning rope and Viṣhṇu (above) presiding over the operation — he will eventually deceive the asuras to make sure that the *amrita* goes to the devas alone. Note also the airport's official name of 'Suvarnabhumi Airport' — does it remind you of something?

The India–Myanmar–Thailand Trilateral Highway is a modern effort to revive and strengthen these age-old connections. Stretching from India's state of Manipur through Myanmar and into Thailand, this highway improves overland connectivity, enhances regional trade, and supports greater cooperation among the countries involved.

Through both ancient and modern ties, India and Thailand demonstrate how geography, history, and shared values can bring nations closer together across land and sea.

© NCERT not to be republished

The Malay Peninsula

Relations between India and **Malaysia** are rooted in historical, cultural, and economic linkages dating back over two millennia, when the Malay Peninsula was connected to India through sea routes across the Bay of Bengal (Fig. 2.20). Hindu and Buddhist cultural influences began early on, with (as in Thailand) names such as 'Srivijaya Kingdom'; around the 4th century CE, the region adopted a script based on India's Brāhmī script. Such influences remain visible in Malaysian society through art and literature in particular even though by the 15th century Islam became the predominant religion. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a large number of Indian workers, mainly from south India, migrated to Malaysia to work as labour on the rubber plantations. The Malaysian Indian community remains prominent today with 9 per cent of the population being of Indian origin.

India is one of Malaysia's largest trading partners, with collaborations in palm oil, energy, infrastructure, and information technology. The two nations are also strategic partners, working closely on regional security and maritime stability. Many Indian organisations working in areas of manufacturing, information technology, research, tourism, and education have set up collaborations with local companies, furthering economic ties.



Fig. 2.22. The Petronas Towers at Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital, are the world's tallest twin skyscrapers.

© NCERT not to be republished

The 'Lion City'

The name of **Singapore** derives from 'Singapuram' or 'lion city', which was the name of an ancient kingdom just off the southern tip of present-day Malaysia. Just like Thailand and Malaysia, it had close cultural and commercial ties with India, with Buddhist monks as well as traders visiting the region a few centuries BCE. After many fluctuations, Singapore became a British colony, then a part of Malaysia, and eventually a separate nation in 1965.

LET'S EXPLORE

Seeing that Tamil is one of Singapore's official languages, what does this suggest to you about the relationship between south India and Singapore?



Fig. 2.23. A signage in Singapore's four official languages — English, Mandarin, Tamil and Malay.

Singapore has served as a benchmark for urban planning and maintenance. The citizens play an important role in keeping the streets litter-free. It helps that anyone found throwing garbage on the street, disrespecting traffic rules or indulging in **jaywalking** will be fined heavily! With a focus on wellbeing, the city has many people-friendly and sustainability-oriented features such as parks, walkways, terrace gardens, and so on.

Jaywalking: Pedestrians walking or crossing roads without taking care to follow traffic rules

Singapore's contacts with India remain vibrant in several areas. In recent years, the island nation has become one of the largest foreign investors in India, especially in infrastructure and technology sectors, and many Indian companies have set up offices in Singapore. Singapore receives large numbers of Indian tourists and is one of the preferred destinations of Indian students for higher studies.

India's presence also remains visible in cultural areas, from art to cuisine to religion (Buddhism being currently the most widely

© NCERT not to be republished

practised religion). Ethnically, about 9 per cent of Singaporean residents are of Indian origin, many of whom live in an area of Singapore called 'Little India'.



Fig. 2.24. Little India, an area of Singapore city

The Indonesian archipelago

India and **Indonesia**, separated by the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, are close maritime neighbours with a long history of cultural, religious and commercial exchange. Indonesia is not a single landmass: it is actually an archipelago, that is, an extensive group of islands (Fig. 2.20) — in this case, several large islands and over 17,000 smaller ones! The two neighbouring nations have a legacy of trade and sociocultural interaction that dates back to early maritime trade between Indian kingdoms and the large islands of Java and Sumatra over 2,000 years ago. Collaborations between India's ancient university of Nālandā and the ancient Indonesian Muara Jambi temple complex further strengthened the bond. Later, Islam travelled to Indonesia from the shores of India.



Fig. 2.25. The Indonesian currency, the rupiah, carries the national symbol, Garuḍa, the vāhana (vehicle) of Viṣhṇu

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.26. The mandala-shaped Borobudur Stūpa, the world's largest Buddhist monument

The shared history and culture, and vision for the future, have played a significant role in expanding bilateral relations. In present times, India and Indonesia work closely in regional groups to promote peace, trade, and sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region. Strategic cooperation has also grown stronger, especially in areas like maritime security, defence, and disaster relief. Both countries have large coastlines and shared concerns about piracy, climate change, and the protection of sea lanes, which makes their partnership especially important.

Together, India and Indonesia show how two ancient civilisations can build a strong, forward-looking partnership rooted in shared values and mutual respect.



DON'T MISS OUT

A *stūpa* is a Buddhist shrine, often built in the shape of a dome, that keeps sacred relics, either of the Buddha himself, of senior monks or of other revered figures. (Remember, for example, the Sanchi Stūpa and the Bharhut Stūpa in Part 1 of this textbook.) The Borobudur Stūpa (Fig. 2.26), built in stone in the 8th and 9th centuries CE, is unique not only for its huge dimensions (tourists would look like tiny dots on the picture) and pyramidal shape in five enormous platforms, but also because it harbours over 500 statues of the Buddha and many smaller *stūpas*. Moreover, its highly geometric design replicates a mandala; mandalas are traditional Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina geometric symbols used in various rituals and generally symbolising the entire cosmos.

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.27. Indonesian actors performing a scene from the Rāmāyaṇa



DON'T MISS OUT

Indonesian islands lie in a region that experiences frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, which makes Indonesia one of the most earthquake-prone countries in the world.

On 26 December 2004, a powerful earthquake under the Indian Ocean near Indonesia triggered a massive tsunami. Giant waves swept across the ocean, striking the coasts of many countries and causing serious damage: in India alone, some 15,000 people lost their lives, especially in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Across the whole region, more than 200,000 people were killed.

This disaster exposed the urgent need for better early warning systems. India thus joined hands with Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and other Indian Ocean countries to set up a network of sensors, satellites, and communication links. The Indian Tsunami Early Warning Centre in Hyderabad helps alert not only India but also neighbouring countries, potentially saving many lives when earthquakes strike the ocean floor.

An Ancient Neighbour

Let us travel westward again. India and **Iran** have shared close ties since the Bronze Age; trade and cultural exchanges took place early between India and the rugged Iranian plateau

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.28. The Shahid Behesti Port at Chabahar, Iran

through land routes passing through present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan (Fig. 2.5). Gradually, such routes became part of the Silk Route, with people, goods, and ideas moving back and forth, connecting the two lands in the fields of language, literature, art, architecture, food etc. Sea routes were also used, since Iran's ports were within easy reach of India's west coast.

The Avesta, the ancient sacred text of Zoroastrianism (see 'India, a Home to Many' in this textbook), has parallels with India's Ṛigveda. Indian texts such as the Mahābhārata mention Persians under the name *Pārasīka*, and the later Persian language (which belongs to the same language family as Sanskrit) was used as court language in India by the Mughals and other rulers. Of course, the Parsis of India have been a living link with the ancient Persian culture.



Fig. 2.29. Joint stamps issued to mark the strategic partnership between India and Iran for the development of ports

In modern times, India and Iran have cooperated in many areas such as trade, energy, and transport. India is helping to develop Iran's Chabahar Port (Figs. 2.28 and 2.29), which gives India better access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Despite international challenges, both countries continue to engage with each other as important neighbours in Asia.

© NCERT not to be republished

The 'Land of Copper'



Fig. 2.30. A copper ingot from Oman, dated to the 3rd millennium BCE

Located on the southeastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula at the intersection of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea (Fig. 2.16), **Oman** shares maritime boundaries with India and holds significant strategic importance. As a key partner in India's engagement with the Gulf region, Oman plays an important role in regional forums.

The relationship between India and Oman is rooted in shared geography, history and cultural ties, with people-to-people contact dating back over 5,000 years, during the time of the Indus or Harappan (or Indus-Sarasvatī) civilisation. As Oman is rich in copper, it is thought that Harappan traders brought back **ingots** of the metal to the coppersmiths of the Indus-Sarasvatī cities (Fig. 2.30).

Ingot: A lump or block of metal put into a shape convenient for transport and reworking.



DON'T MISS OUT



Fig. 2.31. The Motishwar Mandir, a Śhiva temple in Muscat, Oman

Over 10% of the population of Oman is of Indian origin. Merchant communities from north-western parts of India settled there over the past few centuries; there is an indigenous population of Indians living in Oman. The Hindu community was allowed to build a Śhiva temple in the early 20th century (Fig. 2.31).

© NCERT not to be republished



Fig. 2.32. An India-Oman joint military exercise, 2024

Moreover, Oman is India's closest defence partner in the Gulf, being the first in the region where India holds joint military exercises with all three armed forces (Fig. 2.32). The two countries work together on Indian Ocean maritime security.



Before we move on ...

- India and her neighbours share centuries of cultural, spiritual, religious and commercial exchanges. India's schools of thought and belief, arts, literature and architecture left a visible cultural imprint across countries of Southeast Asia.
- Ancient trade routes like the Uttarāpatha, Dakṣhiṇāpatha, the Silk Route, and spice routes connected India with Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Arabian Peninsula, resulting in trade and cultural exchanges with all those regions.
- India spread her traditions peacefully through trade, pilgrimage, and culture.
- Today, regional connectivity projects aim to revive these historical links. Besides, Indian films, music, and television often contribute to sustained bonds, in addition to shared strategic and trade interests.

© NCERT not to be republished

Questions and activities

1. Explain who a maritime neighbour is with two examples with respect to India.
2. How has Buddhism created links with India's neighbours? Give examples to explain your answer.
3. What does 'open border' policy mean? How does the India–Nepal 'open border' policy affect the lives of people living along the border?
4. The chapter says, "Being neighbours is not just about geography." Explain this statement with an example.
5. What are the different ways in which India has helped smaller countries in her neighbourhood? Explain with examples.
6. How do shared challenges become opportunities for cooperation? Were there examples in this chapter to illustrate this?
7. If borders were drawn only by culture and connections, how would the map look different?
8. On blank maps:
   - → Label India's neighbours.
   - → Draw arrows showing cultural flows (e.g., food, festivals, languages) between India and her neighbours.
   - → Imagine and redraw new "borders of friendship" that connect neighbours through rivers, trade routes, or cultural zones.
   - → Collect pictures of the flags of the countries listed in this chapter and write your observations.

© NCERT not to be republished