CHAPTER 2

ETHNIC AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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1. INTRODUCTION

Clinical genetics is increasingly taking centre stage as The Human Genome Project and other advances have generated expectations in not only diagnosis and management of single gene defects, but also in the aetiology of “complex” disorders such as diabetes mellitus (Guttmacher & Collins, 2002). The latter are currently poorly understood polygenic disorders that are due to gene-environment interactions (Burchard, 2003).

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the demographic, social, historical and religious elements of the region. We touch on the social constructs, i.e. ethnicity, which categorise individuals to groups and highlight the cultural diversity of the people of this region. It must be emphasised that we do not cover these topics comprehensively and the reader is advised to consult other resources for further details.

The Indian subcontinent [ISC] is a vast and richly diverse area that includes India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The diversity is reflected not only in the number of people but also the languages, religions, cultural beliefs and practices.

The geography of the region has been influential in explaining its history, with the great Himalayas in the north deterring any conquest, and the seas that surround it. Two land routes enable access to this region, one through the Khyber Pass in the Hindu Kush, and the other in the eastern hill region of the Burma frontier. The ISC covers a vast land area of approximately 4 million square kilometres [Fig: 1-1].

2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The history of India is characterised by successive waves of migration of people through the Hindu Kush and settlement, particularly in the north.

Prior to the discovery of two major cities – Mohenjodaro and Harappa in the Province of Sind and Punjab, of what is now Pakistan – the Indo-Aryans were regarded as the first founders of civilisation in the ISC (Thapar, 1979). Since the 1920’s, further sites of this early Indus civilisation (the Harappa) have been discovered dating from 3000 BC. It is also thought that this civilisation was not an offshoot of Mesopotamia but progression of indigenous developments (Keay, 2001). A sudden decline occurred between 1800 and 1700 BC due to climatic changes in the region, namely flooding.
The Vedic literature, in Sanskrit, provides the source of information for the impact of the Indo-Aryans. In 1786, Jones (Cavalli-Sforza, 2001) discovered the close relationship between Sanskrit, language of the Indo-Aryans, and the Greek, Latin, German and Celtic languages. Given the vast spread of the Indo-European languages, scholars favour the steppes of southern Russia and the Ukraine, or the shores of the Caspian for the homeland of the Aryans (Thapar, 1979; Keay, 2001). The languages spoken by the southern states of India (e.g. Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala) belong to the Dravidian family, which is distinct from the Indo-Aryan (Cavalli-Sforza, 2001). The Dravidian-speakers are thought to have preceded the Indo-Aryans in the ISC.

By 1500 BC the Aryan tribes had migrated and entered the ISC through Hindu Kush Mountains (Thapar, 1979). They initially settled in the Punjab and migrated east along the river Ganga and Yamuna. Along the way they conquered the indigenous people, dasa, who were characterised as dark, flat-nosed, and uncouth. The Aryans on the other hand were fairer, finer-featured, taller and a superior people.

Fear of loss of their Aryan identity led to the development of a caste system to prevent assimilation with the Dasas. This was called varna, which in Sanskrit means colour. This legacy still exists, and the main four divisions are: brahmans (priests), kshatriyas (warriors), vaishyas (peasant farmers) and shudras (serfs and the Dasas). This was a hereditary system prohibiting marriage between the main divisions and with elaborate rules of endogamy and exogamy (Keay, 2001).

From 900-520 BC, the second phase of urbanisation occurred in the Ganges valley with establishment of numerous tribal kingdoms. This was a result of agrarian extension and control of trade routes. This period saw the emergence of two religious movements - Buddhism and Jainism [Table 2-1].

In 600 BC, the Persian (Iran) empire extended as far as the Indus Valley. But this was overthrown when Alexander the Great entered the ISC in 327 BC and reached as far the river Beas. Within 3 years Alexander was dead, and by 317 BC all peripheral Greek outposts in the ISC had been abandoned. This vacuum saw the beginning of the Mauryan Empire starting with Chandragupta and continued with Ashoka. This empire covered nearly the whole of the ISC (Thapar, 1979).

From the times of the Mauryas to the Guptas (c 500 AD), the empires of ancient India were based in the north. But during the early medieval period (606 BC to 1100 AD), central and south India came to prominence as the seat of power shifted from the east to the west (Keay, 2001).

By 1206 AD, Islamic rule was established in northern India beginning with the Delhi Sultanate and lasting through to the Mughal Empire. With the decline of the latter during the 1700’s, independent states were established before the penetration of the East India Company in Bengal. The East India Company was dissolved in 1858 and the ISC was under the Crown until independence in 1947.

Besides the British, other Europeans also had strong holds in southern India – the Portugese in Goa, the French in Pondicherry and the Dutch on the east coast of India (Watson, 1974).

The continual unrest under the British Raj and calls for Independence saw the division of the ISC in 1947 into, initially, India and West and East Pakistan.