

West Bengal

State (pop., 2008 est.: 87,869,000), northeastern India.

It is bordered by the countries of Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh and the states of Orissa, Jharkhand, Bihar, Sikkim, and Assam and has an area of 34,267 sq mi (88,752 sq km); the capital is Kolkata (Calcutta). It encompasses two broad natural regions, the Gangetic Plain in the south and the sub-Himalayan and Himalayan area in the north. From the 3rd century bce the broader region of Bengal formed part of Ashoka's empire. In the 4th century ce it was absorbed into the Gupta empire. From the 13th century it was under Muslim rule until it came under the British in the 18th century. At Indian independence in 1947, Bengal was partitioned, with the eastern sector becoming East Pakistan (later Bangladesh) and the western sector becoming India's West Bengal. Agriculture is the state's main economic activity. It is noted for its artistic endeavours, including filmmaking.

It is located in the northeastern part of the country. It is bounded to the north by the state of Sikkim and the country of Bhutan, to the northeast by the state of Assam, to the east by the country of Bangladesh, to the south by the Bay of Bengal, to the southwest by the state of Orissa, to the west by the states of Jharkhand and Bihar, and to the northwest by the country of Nepal. West Bengal has a peculiar configuration; its breadth varies from 200 miles (320 km) at one point to hardly 10 miles (16 km) at another. Its roughly 1,350-mile (2,200-km) frontier with Bangladesh, neither natural nor well defined, is of strategic importance. Although in area West Bengal ranks as one of the smaller states of India, it is one of the largest in population. The capital is Kolkata (Calcutta). Area 34,267 square miles (88,752 square km). Pop. (2008 est.) 87,869,000.

Demography			
		1991	2001
Population	Total	68077965	80176197
	Male	35510633	41465985
	Female	32567332	38710212
% Share in Country's Population		8.12	7.79
% share of Urban Population (India)		27.48 (25.73)	27.97 (27.82)
% share of Rural Population (India)		72.52 (74.27)	72.03 (72.18)
% share of major religious communities (India)	Hindus	74.72 (82.00)	72.47 (80.46)
	Muslims	23.61 (12.12)	25.25 (13.43)
% share of SC (India)		23.62 (16.48)	23.02 (16.2)
% share of ST (India)		5.59 (8.08)	5.50 (8.2)
% share of Children		16.98 (17.94)	14.24 (15.93)

(0-6)			
Sex Ratio (India)	All	917 (927)	934 (933)
	SC	931 (922)	949 (936)
	ST	964 (972)	982 (978)
	Children of (0-6)	967 (945)	960 (927)
Population Density (per Sq. Km) (India)		767 (274)	903 (324)
Decadal Growth rate (%) (India)		24.73 (23.85)	17.77 (21.34)

Education				
			1991	2001
Literacy Rate(%) (India)	All	Total	57.70 (52.21)	68.64 (64.8)
		Male	67.81 (64.13)	77.20 (75.3)
		Female	46.56 (39.29)	59.61 (53.7)
		Rural	50.50 (44.69)	63.42 (58.7)
		Urban	75.27 (73.08)	81.25 (79.9)
	SC	Total	42.21 (37.41)	59.04 (54.7)
		Male	54.55 (49.91)	70.54 (66.6)
		Female	28.87 (23.76)	46.90 (41.9)
	ST	Total	27.78 (29.60)	43.40 (47.1)
		Male	40.07 (40.65)	57.38 (59.2)
Female		14.98 (18.19)	29.15 (34.8)	
Gender Gap in Literacy			21.25 (24.84)	17.41 (21.6)
			Primary	Upper Primary
No of Schools-SSA-2006			50255 (Govt.)	11440 (Govt/Govt aided)

Pupil - Teacher Ratio(Govt)-SSA-'06	45.20	61.41
Net Enrolment Ratio(overall)SSA'06	98.03	78.74
DropOut Rate(Cohort study SSA 2004)	19.92	29.70

Administrative Information	
No of Sub-division	66
No. of Municipalities (2004)	120
No of Municipal Corporation (2004)	6
No of Blocks	341
No of Mouza	40782
No of Police Stations (2004)	456
No of Gram Panchayats	3354
Inhabited Villages(2001)	37945
Area (Sq. K.M.)	88752
No of Family Welfare Centre	506
No of PHCs	922
% of Electrified Villages	83.6
Electrified Household (%) (01.04.05)	24.34
Av. Population per Bank Offices(RBI-2005)	19000



Shri M. K. Narayanan
Governor, West Bengal



Shri Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, Chief Minister, West Bengal

Minister in Charge

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Minister of State

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Land

West Bengal may be broadly divided into two natural geographic divisions—the Gangetic Plain in the south and the sub-Himalayan and Himalayan area in the north. The Gangetic Plain contains fertile alluvial soil deposited by the Ganges (Ganga) River and its tributaries and distributaries. It also features numerous marshes and shallow lakes formed out of dead river courses. Indeed, the Ganges, which now runs through the narrow middle section of the state before entering Bangladesh, has been moving steadily eastward for centuries; very little of its water now goes to the sea via the western distributaries, of which the principal one is the Hugli (Hooghly). The state capital, Kolkata, is situated on the Hugli in the southern portion of West Bengal. Another important river, the Damodar, joins the Hugli southwest of Kolkata. The elevation of the plain increases slowly toward the west; the rise is most marked near the Chota Nagpur plateau of neighbouring Jharkhand.

The sub-Himalayan tract, known as the West Bengal Duars, or Western Duars, is a part of the Tarai lowland belt between the Himalayas and the plain. Once infested with malaria, the area is now well-drained and cultivated. Some of the finest tea plantations of India are situated there. North of the Duars, the Himalayan mountain ranges rise abruptly along the northern boundary of the state. Mount Kanchenjunga, actually located in adjacent Sikkim, dominates the landscape of the area, particularly in Darjiling (Darjeeling). On a clear day, Mount Everest also can be seen in the distance.

Climate

West Bengal's climate is transitional between tropical wet-dry in the southern portions and humid subtropical in the north. Throughout West Bengal there is a pronounced seasonal disparity in rainfall. For example, Kolkata averages about 64 inches (1,625 mm) per year, of which an average of 13 inches (330 mm) falls in August and less than 1 inch (25 mm) in December. The state also is subject to considerable variability from year to year. In the sub-Himalayan region, rainfall is considerably greater.

The year may be broadly divided into three marked seasons—the hot and dry season (March to early June), with dry sultry days and frequent thunderstorms; the hot and wet season (mid-June to September), when rain-bearing monsoon winds blow from the southwest; and the cold (cool) season (October to February), when days are dry and clear and stable atmospheric conditions prevail. Average high temperatures at Kolkata range from about 80 °F (27 °C) in December and January to nearly 100 °F (38 °C) in April and May.

Plant and animal life

Forests occupy more than one-tenth of the total land area of the state, and the region as a whole has a rich and varied plant life. In the sub-Himalayan plains the principal forest trees include sal (*Shorea robusta*) and shisham, or Indian rosewood (*Dalbergia sissoo*); the forests are interspersed with reeds and tall grasses. On the Himalayan heights vegetation varies according to the altitude, with coniferous belts occurring at higher levels. The delta of the Hugli constitutes the western end of the dense coastal mangrove forest called the Sundarbans. A large portion of this unreclaimed and sparsely populated area bordering Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal has been set aside as a national park.

The forests are inhabited by tigers, panthers, elephants, gaurs (wild cattle), and rhinoceroses, as well as by other animals of the Indian plain, large and small. Reptiles and birds include the same species as are common throughout the Indian subcontinent.

People

The majority of West Bengal's people live in rural villages. Of those living in urban areas, more than half reside in greater Kolkata.

Of the different religions, Hinduism claims the adherence of more than three-fourths of the population. Most of the remainder is Muslim. Throughout the state, Buddhists, Christians, Jains, and Sikhs constitute small minority communities.

Bengali, the main language of the state, is spoken by much of the population. Other languages include Hindi, Santali, Urdu (primarily the language of Muslims), and Nepali (spoken largely in the area of Darjiling). A small number of people speak Kurukh, the language of the Oraon indigenous group. English, together with Bengali, is the language of administration, and English and Hindi serve as lingua francas at the national level.

Agriculture

Agriculture dominates both the landscape and the economy of West Bengal. Its proportion of agricultural land is among the highest of all the Indian states. Rice, which requires extensive irrigation, is the leading crop in nearly every area. Indeed, despite its relatively small size, West Bengal produces a significant percentage of India's rice harvest. Jute, the second leading crop, is especially prominent along the border with Bangladesh and south of the Ganges River. Mangoes, jackfruit, and bananas are widely produced in the southern and central portions of the state. Wheat and potatoes are produced as winter crops throughout the south. The northern areas around Darjiling and Jalpaiguri have long been known for their production of high-quality tea. The Darjiling region also produces oranges, apples, pineapples, ginger, and cardamom.

Industry

The state's most important industrial belt is a corridor extending for a number of miles north and south of Kolkata, along the Hugli River. Another significant industrial region is located along the Damodar River. There are steel plants at Durgapur and Burnpur and a locomotive plant at Chittaranjan. Haldia, the terminus of an oil pipeline from Assam and the site of a large oil refinery, also has a petrochemical industry. Other important manufactures include ships, automobiles, chemicals and fertilizers, wagons, electronics, paper, and cotton textiles. The state has a large number of small-scale and cottage industries as well. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the only mineral resources of West Bengal that sustained nationally significant exploitation were coal and clay for brickmaking.

Transportation

Local river transportation was augmented by steam navigation in the 19th century—first introduced between Kolkata, Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh), and Guwahati (Assam). The division of Bengal in 1947 and the ongoing deterioration of river channels have disrupted river transport. Nevertheless, Kolkata and its sister port of Haldia, farther south, still handle international trade. West Bengal saw the inauguration of the railway system in eastern India in 1854, and local railway headquarters are now located in the state. Kolkata was the first Indian city to open an underground railway system. National highways link West Bengal with the rest of India, while state highways provide internal connections. There is an international airport at Kolkata as well as several smaller airfields within the state.

Constitutional framework

The structure of the government of West Bengal, like that of most Indian states, is determined by the national constitution of 1950. The head of state is the governor, who is appointed by the president of India. The elected Council of Ministers, with a chief minister at its head, aids and advises the governor. The chief minister is appointed by the governor, and the other ministers are appointed by the governor on the advice of the chief minister. The Council of Ministers is collectively responsible to the state legislature, which consists of a single house, the Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha). The constitution provides for a High Court; its chief justice and judges are appointed by the president of India. Other judges are appointed by the governor.

The state is divided administratively into a number of districts. Each district, except that of Kolkata, is administered by a collector, who is also the district magistrate. Districts, in turn, are divided into

subdivisions, each administered by a subdivisional officer. Units of police jurisdiction vary in area according to population. Most encompass several *mawzas* (villages).

With the object of developing rural self-government, *mawzas* were grouped together under elected local authorities known as *panchayats*. Established under the West Bengal Panchayat Act of 1956, *panchayats* are entrusted with sanitary and conservation services and with the supervision of the village police and the development of cottage industries. A three-tiered *panchayat* system, comprising several thousand village-level *panchayats*, several hundred intermediate-level *panchayats*, and more than a dozen district-level *panchayats*, covers the rural area.

Health and welfare

Medical facilities include hospitals, clinics, health centres, and dispensaries. Family-planning services are available in district bureaus, as well as in urban and rural centres. An employees' state insurance scheme provides factory workers with health, employment, safety, and maternity insurance and also provides a free medical service.

A social welfare directorate coordinates various welfare services dealing with orphans, people with mental and physical disabilities, and the underprivileged. The government's social-welfare enterprises are supplemented by private agencies, of which the most prominent are the Ramakrishna Mission, founded by the Hindu reformer and teacher Vivekananda in 1897, and the Order of the Missionaries of Charity (1948), founded by Mother Teresa, recipient of the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize.

Education

West Bengal has more than 10 degree-granting universities, as well as engineering and medical colleges and many technical institutes. The universities of Calcutta (1857), Jadavpur (1955), and Rabindra Bharati (1962) are all located in Kolkata. The science laboratories of the University of Calcutta, the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, and the Bose Institute have made notable contributions to science. The Asiatic Society of Bengal, a scholarly organization founded in 1784, is headquartered in Kolkata. Vishva-Bharati University, in Shantiniketan (now part of Bolpur), is a world-famous centre for the study of Indology and international cultural relations.

The state has a central library, together with a number of district, area, and rural libraries. More than 5,000 adult education centres aid in literacy training. The state's literacy rate, which approached 70 percent in the early 21st century, is one of the highest in India, and the disparity in the rate between men and women is lower than the national average.

Cultural life

Bengalis have long fostered art, literature, music, and drama. The visual arts have, by tradition, been based mainly on clay modeling, terra-cotta work, and decorative painting. Bengali literature dates to before the 12th century. The Caitanya movement, an intensely emotional form of Hinduism inspired by the medieval saint Caitanya (1485–1533), shaped the subsequent development of Bengali poetry until the early 19th century, when contact with the West sparked a vigorous creative synthesis. The modern period has produced, among others, the Nobel Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), whose contribution still dominates the Indian literary scene.

Traditional music takes the form of devotional and cultural songs. Rabindra Sangeet, songs written and composed by Tagore, draw on the pure Indian classical as well as traditional folk-music sources. They exert a powerful influence in Bengali cultural life.

The theatre is popular, and performances—amateur as well as professional—are sophisticated. *Yatras* (*jatras*), traditional open-air performances that may treat mythological and historical topics or contemporary themes, are popular both in the countryside and in urban areas. The *kavi* is an impromptu duel in musical verse between village poets. The *kathakata*, a religious recital, is another traditional form of rural entertainment, based on folklore.

The film industry is a well-established modern form of popular entertainment. Bengali films have earned national and international awards for their delicate handling of Indian themes; the works of the directors Satyajit Ray, Tapan Sinha, Mrinal Sen, and Aparna Sen are particularly notable.

History

The name of Bengal, or Bangla, is derived from the ancient kingdom of Vanga, or Banga. References to it occur in early Sanskrit literature, but its early history is obscure until the 3rd century bce, when it formed part of the extensive Mauryan empire inherited by the emperor Ashoka. With the decline of Mauryan power, anarchy once more supervened. In the 4th century ce the region was absorbed into the Gupta empire of Samudra Gupta. Later it came under control of the Pala dynasty. From the beginning of the 13th century to the mid-18th century, when the British gained ascendancy, Bengal was under Muslim rule—at times under governors acknowledging the suzerainty of the Delhi sultanate but mainly under independent rulers.

In 1757 British forces under Robert Clive defeated those of the nawab (ruler) of Bengal, Sirāj al-Dawlah, in the Battle of Plassey. In 1765 the nominal Mughal emperor of northern India, Shah ‘Ālam II, granted to the British East India Company the *dīwānī* of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa—that is, the right to collect and administer the revenues of those areas. By the Regulating Act of 1773, Warren Hastings became the first British governor-general of Bengal. The British-controlled government, centred at Calcutta (now Kolkata), was declared to be supreme: essentially, the governor-general of Bengal was the chief executive of British India. Thus, the Bengal Presidency, as the province was known, had powers of superintendence over the other British presidencies, those of Madras (now Chennai) and Bombay (now Mumbai).

Britain was not, however, the only European presence in Bengal. The town of Hugli, north of Calcutta, was the location of a Portuguese factory (trading post) until 1632; Hugli-Chinsura (Chunchura), the next town south, was the Dutch post until 1825; the next town, Shrirampur (Serampore), was the Danish post until 1845; and Chandernagore (Chandannagar) remained in French hands until 1949.

From 1834 Bengal’s governor-general bore the title “governor-general of India,” but in 1854 the post was relieved of the direct administration of Bengal, which was placed under a lieutenant governor. Thenceforward, the government of British India became distinct from that of Bengal. In 1874 Assam was transferred from the charge of the lieutenant governor and placed under a separate chief commissioner. In 1905 the British determined that Bengal had become too unwieldy a charge for a single administration, and, in spite of violent Hindu protests, it was partitioned into two provinces, each under its own lieutenant governor: one comprised western Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa; the other included

eastern Bengal and Assam. In 1911, because of continued opposition to partition, Bengal was reunited under one governor, Bihar and Orissa under a lieutenant governor, and Assam once more under a chief commissioner. At the same time, Delhi became the capital of India in place of Calcutta.

Under the Government of India Act (1935), Bengal was constituted an autonomous province in 1937. This remained the situation until the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into the two dominions of Pakistan and India after the British withdrawal in 1947. The eastern sector of Bengal, largely Muslim, became East Pakistan (later Bangladesh); the western sector became India's West Bengal. The partition of Bengal left West Bengal with ill-defined boundaries and a constant inflow of non-Muslim, mostly Hindu, refugees from East Pakistan. More than 7 million refugees entered the already densely populated state after 1947, and their rehabilitation placed an immense burden on the administration.

In 1950 the princely state of Cooch Behar (Koch Bihar) was integrated with West Bengal. After the linguistic and political reorganization of Indian states in 1956, West Bengal gained some 3,140 square miles (8,130 square km) from Bihar. The additional land provided a link between the previously separated northern and southern parts of the state.
