

# SOUTH AMERICA

South America's existence came to light after its fortuitous discovery by Columbus. Within this fourth largest continent, lay hidden a diversity of physical landforms, flora and fauna, people and their cultures. South America was then rightly described as a part of the 'New World'. But it is no longer an isolated continent today. Beginning with colonial rule to today's market driven economy, like every other continent it has experienced the forces of change.



## Natural Landscape

Western margin of the continent is rimmed by one of the world's longest and highest mountain ranges, the Andes. The Andes are young fold mountains, much like our Himalayas and run all along the west coast for over 7,000 km. There are three parallel ranges with the one in east being higher. Such parallel ranges are also called cordillera, a Spanish word meaning rope or chain. Mt Aconcagua is the highest peak. Mt Ojas del Salado in the Andes is the highest active volcano in the world. Lying between these parallel ranges are some high intermontane plateaus called altiplano. The Bolivian Altiplano

is one such plateau.

Outside the Andes there are two blocks of highlands, the Guiana Massif in the north and the Brazilian Highlands in southeast Brazil. The latter is famous for coffee plantations.

The very mention of South America brings to our mind the mighty Amazon and its rainforests. The Amazon river basin lies between the Brazilian and Guiana Massifs. Orinico, Parana and Paraguay are other important rivers which drain the continent. They form mighty waterfalls and have been harnessed for hydroelectric power. Parana is a south flowing river draining into the Rio-de La Plata. It forms the boundary between Paraguay and Brazil. Itaipu, the largest dam of South America, is located on it and generates 40% of Brazil's electricity. Guira falls, with the most voluminous discharge in the world are also on the Parana.

## Climate and Vegetation

As much of South America lies within the tropical zone, its climate is generally hot. The Amazon basin has an equatorial type of climate. It is hot and wet all year-round. This region is covered with tropical rainforests which are locally known as Selvas. They are a source of hardwood such as mahogany. However balsa, the lightest wood in the world, also comes from the same forests.

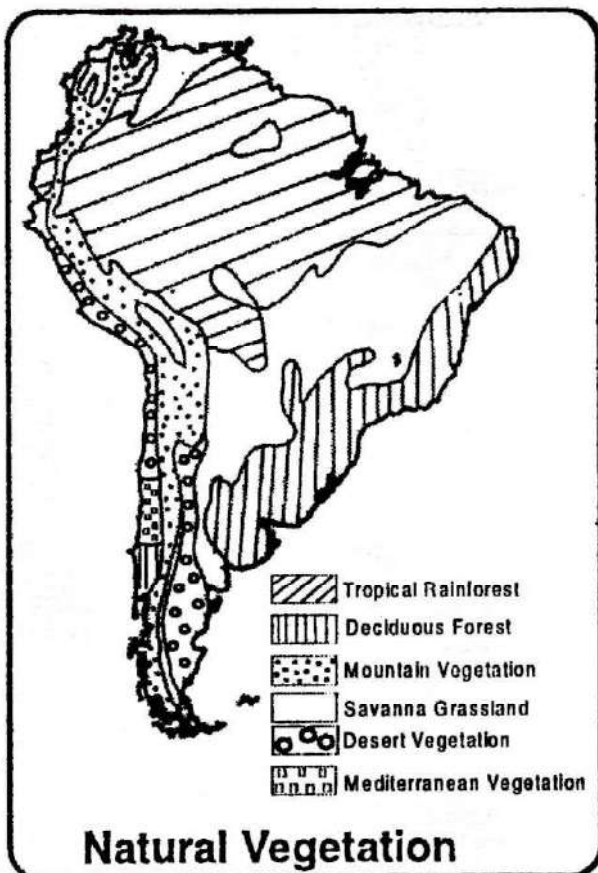
On either side of the Selvas lie the tropical grasslands called Llanos in the north and Campos in the South. They experience the tropical savanna climate characterised by summer rains with a distinct dry period during the winters. The alternate wet and dry climate causes leaching of soil nutrients, leading to the loss of fertility.

South of Campos lies the region marked by a variant of the warm temperate eastern margin type of climate (China type). However, narrowness of the continent and maritime influence eliminate the monsoonal elements that otherwise characterise the China type of climate in the northern hemisphere. In South America this region experiences a small annual range of temperature with rainfall occurring in

prolonged showers. This region also experiences violent local storms. Pampero, a cold wind that blows in Argentina and Uruguay is accompanied with thunder and lightning.

Northern Argentina, southern Bolivia and Paraguay occupy an area of scrub forests and swampy grasslands. This region is called Gran Chaco and looks green at all times because of year-round rains. Some important tree species found here include Quebracho and Yerba mate.

Parts of southern Peru and northern Chile experience a typical hot desert type of climate. The Atacama Desert, the driest in the world, is a trade wind desert. Dry conditions in Atacama are also accentuated by the desiccating effect of the cold Peruvian ocean current. Another desert in South America is the Patagonia, a mid-latitude desert. Unlike the mid-latitude deserts of northern hemisphere that are characterised by continentality, the Patagonian desert is a desert because of the rain-shadow effect of the Andes. Natural vegetation in the deserts consists of scrubs, prickly pear, and other xerophytic plants like cactus, that are adapted to dry climatic conditions.



Central Chile experiences the Mediterranean type of climate which is characterised by warm dry summers and cool moist winters. In fact, this type of climate is best developed here, because of the shifting of wind belts that causes the Trade winds to blow offshore during summers and the Westerlies to blow onshore during winters. Natural vegetation here consists of the evergreen trees having thick shiny leaves which are able to withstand the drought-like conditions. Oak, walnut, chestnut and fig are some of the common trees found here.

Cool Temperate Western Margin type (British type) of climate is found in southern Chile. Maritime influence explains the equable climate here. Natural vegetation consists of temperate mixed deciduous forests. Trees occur in pure stands and have sparse undergrowth. Some important species found here are elm, ash, birch, beech and poplar.

South of Gran Chaco and the Brazilian Highlands lies the region of temperate grasslands called Pampas in Argentina. Though such regions generally experience extreme continentality in the northern hemisphere, the temperate grasslands here are marked by lesser temperature extremes due to the maritime influence. These grasslands are practically treeless. In the Pampas, the natural grass has been replaced by a more nutritious leguminous variety called Alfalfa. These temperate grasslands have emerged as the chief cattle and sheep rearing regions of South America.

### Human Aspects

The Andes, the Amazon river and the Equatorial rainforests are surely the most striking of the physical features, but of a greater consequence has been the influence of the colonialists. Notwithstanding the economic fallout of colonial rule, it has brought about the rise of nation-states and a multi-cultural society.

People of South America belong to three main racial groups - Amerindians, Blacks and Europeans. Besides these, there are a large number of people of mixed origin, such as the Mestizos, Mulattos and Zambos. Of these, Mestizos form the largest group. Persons of Indian origin who came as indentured labour

have settled in large numbers in Surinam, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago. Though well distributed, racial groups do show regional concentration.

South American countries exhibit demographic characteristics which are typical of developing countries.

The most interesting aspect of South American demography is the prevalence of a high degree of urbanisation despite low levels of technology and development. Rural to Urban migration is high because of both the push and pull factors.

Population distribution of South America shows a peripheral concentration, i.e. most of the population lives in the coastal regions.

Economic geography of the continent is centred around agriculture and trade in primary products. Plantation agriculture is practised along northeast Brazil. This region was actually the source area of the first colonisers. Their use of African slave labour and subsequently indentured labour is reflected in the dominance of blacks in the Brazilian northeast and Asian Indians in the Guianas. Coffee is the chief crop of Brazil grown in the southeastern highlands. It is also grown in the Andean templanada. Commercial agriculture and sheep and cattle rearing are practised in southeast in the temperate grasslands. Here, there is a preponderance of Europeans who found this region more habitable. The Mediterranean region in Chile is suitable for growing citrus fruits and has a number of vine yards. Subsistence farming is more common in the Mestizo dominated valley region. Shifting agriculture is still practised in the Selva.

After the downfall of the Incas, South America became the scene of conflict between the Portuguese and the Spanish during the 15th century. Viceroyalties that they established, existed only to exploit the riches from these areas. During the joint struggle for independence, alienation between the regions was accentuated. These regions later realigned to form nine countries. Natural frontiers like the Andes and Atacama have often restricted contact and have thereby contributed to the

sense of isolation and exclusivity. Post-independence too, relationship between Brazil, the former Portuguese colony and its neighbours with a Spanish legacy has remained restrained owing mainly to physical barriers and cultural contrasts.

Today, the South American continent is one of contrasts. Colonial experience has brought about a change in the attitude of people towards nature, from one of harmonious coexistence to that of gross exploitation. Modern South American countries are also facing the consequences of globalisation and are today characterised by socio-economic inequity that manifests in high crime rates, drug trafficking and separatist movements. Socio-economic inequity and regional disparities that were unleashed by the colonialists have now accentuated by globalisation. This spatial and socio-economic imbalance has taken its toll, both on human development and ecological balance. Poverty and environmental degradation are rampant. The Amazonian Rainforests, the 'lungs of the world', are being irreparably damaged. Encroachments here have led to large scale clearing of forests, accounting for almost half of the global deforestation.

Though, South American countries, have a favourable population resource balance but, low level technology has prevented the emergence of this region to the forefront of international community. The reality of the external debt, insurgency, separatist movements and crime have restricted these countries to third world status.

Although South America portrays the familiar reality of a resource rich, technology poor region, exploited and colonised by foreigners, the continent is on a comeback trail with Brazil and Argentina emerging as large economies. Brazil in particular, has been impressive with its growing industrial sector. It is often referred to as the 'South American Giant'. The grasslands of Sertao are among the many answers to the world's food problem. It has been asserted that a continent-scale green revolution in South America and Africa can wipe out hunger from the face of earth.

- **Latin** was the language of the ancient Romans from which Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese have been derived. The language itself though is no longer commonly spoken. Because the countries of Central and South America were formerly under Spanish and Portuguese occupation, the continent is referred to as 'Latin America'.
- **Samba** is a dance form of Brazil. It is supposed to have been influenced by the African dances. The dancers are known for their fluid body movement, particularly the lower torso. **Lambada** is yet another dance of Brazil. Lambada dancers perform in pairs, synchronising their movements of feet, hips and torso.
- **Amazon River** in South America is considered the largest river in the world and second longest too. The river drains a basin of approximately 70 lakh km<sup>2</sup>, has more than 1100 tributaries and carries 1/5th of world's running water. Amazon Rainforests are an environmentalist's greatest concern today due to their rapid deforestation. The forests are estimated to contain 1/3rd of our planet's trees and supply about half of earth's oxygen.
- **Brazil** is the 5th largest country in the world in terms of the population and also in terms of area. It is about 2.5 times the size of India. Its population is greater than that of all other South American countries combined and occupies a little less than half the area of South America. Brazil also has the world's largest reserves of iron ore in Serra dos Carajas hills. With its growing economy Brazil is often called as the 'South American Giant'. Brazil is one of the world's largest producer of coffee, bananas and manioc.
- **Brazil** derives its name from a redwood tree, Brasil.
- **Brazilians** have successfully substituted sugarcane based alcohol for gasoline called **gasohol**. Nearly 40 per cent of all cars in Brazil run on gasohol.
- Brazil is the only commercial producer of **Quartz Crystals** in the world.
- **Piranhas** are a variety of fish that inhabit freshwater streams in Central and South America. They are efficient predators and eat mostly other fish but may attack anything that falls into the water. Among the 30 known species of piranha, the red piranha, *Serrasalmus nattereri*, is considered the most dangerous to livestock and humans.
- **Rubber tree** is indigenous to the Amazon rainforests. This explains its scientific name, *Hevea Brasiliensis*. With the establishment of rubber plantations in southeast Asia, Amazon region lost its pre-eminent position.
- **Atacama** is an arid desert in northern Chile and extends 960 km south from Peru border. The desert has almost no vegetation and is considered the world's driest desert. The town of Calama recorded a 400 year drought upto 1971. Only one stream, Rio Loa reaches the Pacific Ocean. Water is piped to the towns and nitrate fields. The Atacama desert was ceded to Chile by Peru and Bolivia in 1983-84. Atacama is rich in nitrates (Caliche), iodine and borax.
- **Cocoa** from which both drinks and chocolates are made is obtained from the beans or seeds of a tropical tree. Though Africa today leads world's production in cocoa, the tree is indigenous to tropical America and was first found growing wild in lowlands of Central America from Panama to the Yucatan Peninsula and in the river basins of Amazon and Orinico.
- **South America** is the largest producer of **Cocaine**, a narcotic which has created havoc among the younger generations. Today 75% of world's cocaine is grown in Bolivia, Peru and Colombia.
- **Alfa-alfa** is a leguminous plant which is highly nutritious and helps in maintaining soil fertility. It is also used as a cattle feed.
- **Sao Paulo** is the third largest urban agglomeration in the world after Tokyo and Mexico city. It is the largest urban agglomeration in the southern hemisphere. Sao Paulo province accounts for 22% of

Brazil's population and 40% of the country's GDP. It is also the leading industrial region of S America

- **Off Peru** and **Chile coasts** the upwelling cold waters of the Humboldt current create good conditions for plankton growth. This helps anchovies, a type of fish, to thrive on. **Guano birds** then feed on these anchovies and their droppings have accumulated as large phosphate reserves on the offshore islands of Peru and Chile. Peru, today, is the largest producer of phosphates.
- **'Polygon of drought'** is a term used to describe the Brazilian North East.
- **Paraguay** is the world's most completely bilingual country with Spanish as the official language and Amerindian Guaraní being more commonly spoken.
- Though the **official language** in most of the countries is Spanish, the official language of Brazil is Portuguese. Apart from this, native Amerindian languages are also spoken.