

# Chapter 10

## Culture: a geographic “big idea” and some consequences in South Asia

Culture is important, because people with different cultural ideas often do different things, even in places that have similar conditions.

This fact has consequences that can be seen when you look at many maps of South Asia - maps that show rivers, flood protection, irrigation, land use, roads, population, language, colonial history, education, religion, women’s rights, and threats to national security.

Our goal in this chapter is to learn how to interpret maps like these.



The same street in South Asia at two different times of the year.

Photo by Sula Sarkar - not the same Sula as in the story on the next page.

Both Sulas live near the Ganges River, a large river that often floods.

They speak the same language and have the same religion, but they live in different countries. In short, they are good examples of the complicated *cultural geography* of this part of the world.

Definition: **cultural geography** is about the ideas that people have in different places.

Sula’s family is getting ready to move. Soon, they will all get on a bus to visit her aunt about fifteen miles away.

The water level in the Ganges River has been rising for days. Soon, it will spread across this flat land. Only the tops of trees and houses will still be above water. In a few weeks after that, the water will go down, and Sula’s family will return to their home. Then the cleanup begins!

This is the third time they have made this trip in ten years. Their family connections and travel plans are part of the *culture* of people in this part of South Asia.

Definition: a **culture** is a set of shared ideas about how to live.  
 (“Shared” means generally agreed-upon by adults and taught to children.)

South Asia has many different groups of people. These groups often have different cultural ideas. For example, people may have different ideas about how to deal with floods:

**1. Move away.** Some people (like Sula’s family) just move away during floods. People in many other places also choose this way of dealing with environmental problems. They simply leave during cold winters, hot summers, or when hurricanes are coming.

**2. Build higher.**

Some people choose another way – they build houses up on stilts, above the level of the water. They use boats to travel during the flood season.

Photo by Shahnoor Habib Munmun



**3. Build a floodwall.**

Other people build *levees* (also called floodwalls). Levees are artificial hills (often many miles long) made of dirt or concrete. Their purpose is to keep floodwater out of places people want to protect.

Photo by US Department of State



Here are two big complications in South Asia:

1. The Ganges River flows in three different countries. No country has complete control.
2. The Ganges is a sacred river to people who follow Hinduism, the main religion of India.

Some people say that no one should do anything that interferes with the natural flow of a river like the Ganges. Like Noah in the Bible, these people think floods are messages from God.

Religious ideas like these are an important part of culture. The main religion in India is Hinduism, but it is not the only one. Moreover, there are different kinds of Hinduism.

You know what it's like in the United States. Christians are divided into Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, and many other groups. Hindus in South Asia are also divided into different groups. So are Muslims. So are Buddhists. So are people who follow other religions. These differences are part of the cultural geography of South Asia.

In this chapter, we will consider four questions. Where did groups of people with different cultures come from? How did they get to South Asia? How are their cultural ideas similar or different? Why should it matter to Americans?

Here is the big idea:

*Different groups of people often have different cultural ideas.  
Different cultures, in turn, can have different ways of living,  
even in places that have similar conditions.*

**CAUTION:** Whenever we talk about cultures, we make generalizations. General statements almost always have exceptions. As a result, they may not apply to individual people who live in a particular area.

Think of the people around you. Are they all the same?  
Or are some of them really different?

### Science Note – The Causes of Floods in South Asia

Floods in the *subcontinent* of South Asia can have effects on more than a billion people. (That's nearly four times the population of the United States.)

Definition: a **subcontinent** is a large area separated from the rest of a continent by mountains, deserts, or other natural barriers.

Floods in South Asia are the result of three forces that work at very different speeds.

**Plate tectonics.** The first force is the movement of the South Asian subcontinent. It is slowly “crashing into” the rest of Eurasia. This is not like a car crash. Crustal plates move very slowly – less than two inches in a year. This is roughly as fast as your fingernails grow, but it is strong enough to push rocks up and make mountains. It's like pushing some paper against a wall. The paper folds and crumples. In a similar way (but much slower), layers of rock in South Asia are bent and crumpled. The result is the highest mountains in the world – the Himalaya Mountains.

**Monsoons.** The second force is the *monsoon*. This seasonal wind blows in summer from the Indian Ocean toward the land. It brings a lot of rain. The rain is especially heavy where monsoon winds push humid air up high mountains.

**Gravity.** The third force is *gravity*, which makes rain fall and water flow downhill. In South Asia, hundreds of creeks flow down the mountainsides in the monsoon season. These join to form the Ganges, one of the largest rivers in the world.

### Investigating some consequences of culture

South Asia is a good place to investigate cultural differences. This part of the world has several very different cultures. To see why, let's start by looking at the mountains.

Can you imagine a line of high snow-covered mountains stretching from New York to Texas? The Himalaya Mountains are like that. Only two roads cross this long range of mountains. These roads go through gaps between high mountains. The gaps are more than three miles above sea level. That's higher than the highest peaks in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado!

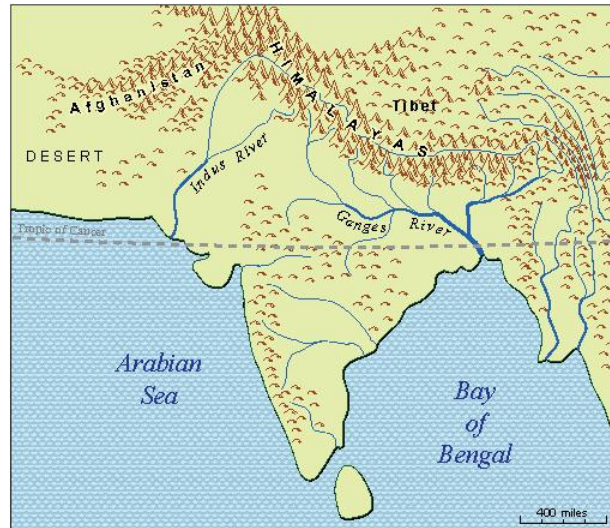
To the **northwest** are the mountains of Afghanistan. They are lower than the Himalayas, but they are still too rugged for easy travel.

Still farther **west** is a desert – one of the hottest and driest deserts on earth.

To the **east** is an area of dense forests, deep canyons, and rushing rivers.

If you tried to build a fence around a large part of the earth, you could hardly do better than nature did in South Asia.

It is not impossible to cross these natural fences. Traders could do it, if their loads were not too heavy. Explorers, refugees, and religious teachers could walk over the high mountains. At times, armies from other places invaded South Asia.



#### Seven historic events that helped shape the cultural geography of South Asia:

1. About 65,000 years ago, humans moving out of Africa reached South Asia. (Sea level was low at the time; people could walk on flat land near the coast.)
2. About 3000 BCE, people began irrigating crops near the Indus River. (Their language is called *Dravidian* – people still speak it in South India.)
3. About 1500 BCE, people who spoke *Indo-European* moved out of central Asia. (Some went west into Europe. Others went southeast into Persia and India.)
4. About 300 BCE, armies came from Greece, led by Alexander the Great.
5. Several times around the year 1, people invaded from Central Asia. (They were pushed south by Xiongnu warriors who lived still farther north.)
6. About 1000 CE, Islamic armies invaded from the west. They started the *Delhi Sultanate*. (A sultanate is a kind of government run by followers of Islam.)
7. In 1498, Vasco de Gama sailed from Europe to India. Several European countries claimed colonies in South Asia. By the 1870s, England ruled most of South Asia.

In this chapter, we will look more closely at several of these “invasions.” Each invader brought new cultural ideas – but they didn’t replace all of the older ideas. Some features of older South Asian cultures (like the idea of *caste*) have remained important for centuries.

Definition: In a **caste** society, your job depends on your family. For example, people in the Brahmin caste became priests and leaders. People in lower castes did jobs like farmer or street sweeper. You had to marry someone in your caste.

**Consequence #1: Some cultural ideas in South Asia are related to the monsoons.**

Definition: **Monsoons** are winds that change direction in different seasons.

In South Asia, it's hot all year long. In Mumbai, for example, average daytime temperature is 89 degrees in December and 90 degrees in June. (Mumbai is large port city on the west coast of India. It is more than four times as large as Chicago. It's called Bombay on old maps.)

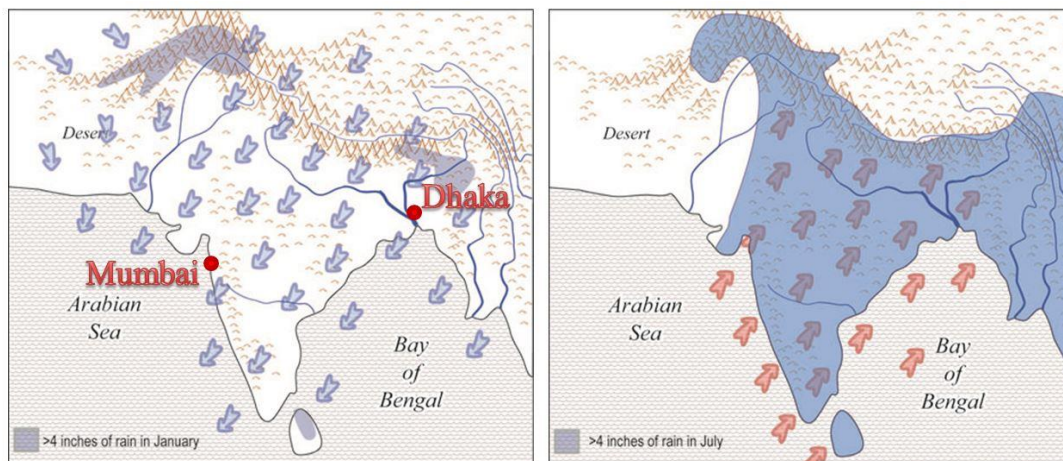
Summer and winter in South Asia, however, have very different amounts of rain. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, gets only 2 inches of rain from November to February. From May to August the city gets nearly 70 inches. That is about twice what Chicago gets all year.

Seasonal differences get even more extreme when monsoon winds go up the sides of mountains. For example, a mountain area north of Dhaka gets about 2 inches of rain in winter. In summer, however, it gets more than 300 inches of rain (That's 25 feet of water!)

That is an average of more than three inches of rain every day for three months.

(Chicago usually has only one or two storms like that in a whole year.)

The monsoon winds and rains have many effects on work schedules, travel plans, festivals, and other activities. And, as you saw earlier, people can have different cultural ideas about how to deal with the floods that often come during monsoon season.



Here is a quick science question. Depending on what books or internet sites you have read, you may or may not know the answer. Give it a try:

The rainy season in South Asia is called the **monsoon**. These summer rains occur because:

- A) The jet stream blows north of the Himalaya Mountains in summer.
- B) The land gets warmer in summer and cooler in winter than ocean water.
- C) Air pressure changes over the middle of the world's largest continent.
- D) The Equatorial Rainy Belt shifts its position. (PS: The chapter about Africa tells why).

The answer to this quiz is “all of the above.” The South Asian monsoon is part of a complex weather system. Unfortunately, many textbooks and websites mention just one cause (usually answer B on the list above). When you make a complex system like the monsoon too simple, it is hard to talk intelligently about an even more complex process, like global warming.

(For more about monsoons, read the two “science boxes” on the next page).

## The Causes of Monsoons

### **In winter,**

- the sun shines directly down on the Tropic of Capricorn, in the southern hemisphere.
- The middle of Asia is cold. Cold air is heavier than warm air. Air pressure is high.
- The jet stream blows south of the Himalaya Mountains. It makes air pressure higher.
- Surface winds over India usually blow toward the ocean. The land gets little rain.

*Dry winter is a result of a complex web of causes.*

### **In summer,**

- The sun shines directly down on the Tropic of Cancer, in the northern hemisphere.
- The middle of Asia is warm. Warm air is lighter than cold air. Air pressure is low.
- The jet stream is north of the Himalayas. This makes air pressure over India lower.
- Surface winds usually blow from the ocean onto the land. They bring a lot of rain.

*Rainy summer is a result of a complex web of causes.*

This is the “backstory” behind the pictures of floods at the beginning of this chapter.

South Asian monsoons have many effects – on plants, animals, farms, buildings, roads, and recreation. (Who wants to play soccer when it rains 3 inches every day?)

The monsoon even has an effect on religious holidays and other festivals. Before we go on, however, let us also look at the effects of global warming on the monsoons.

## Global Warming and Monsoons

Even if you do not remember all the details, remember two things:

- 1) South Asia monsoons are part of a very complex system of temperatures, air pressures, winds, mountains, and rain.
- 2) Monsoons are changing, and the changes may be a result of global warming.

In this book, we cannot even try to make a complete explanation of global warming.

Let us just note that people have observed many changes in South Asia:

- 1) Glaciers on many mountains seem to be melting faster than before.
- 2) Snowfall has increased in some areas; this causes a few glaciers to expand.
- 3) The rainy season starts sooner in some places; this causes earlier floods.
- 4) Floods have gotten stronger in some places; this causes longer floods.
- 5) The dry season lasts longer in some places; this causes some rivers to dry up.
- 6) Hurricanes are more frequent and/or stronger in some places.
- 7) Hurricanes are less frequent in some other places.
- 8) Sea level is rising; this causes floods in low-lying coastal areas.
- 9) High sea level is pushing saltwater into some lowlands near the coast.
- 10) Freshwater floods are pushing seawater back in other places.

There are even more effects. As we said, we will not try to analyze them all here.

At the end of this chapter, however, we will ask a messy question: if the monsoons in South Asia really are changing because of global warming, who should pay for flood damage? Who should pay the costs of adjusting to other changes?

## Consequence #2: Cultural differences in South Asia made it hard for Great Britain to govern all of the subcontinent as a single colony.

Monsoon climate is great for growing spice plants like cinnamon, cloves, ginger, and pepper. Spices were very valuable in ancient times. They could mask the sour taste of food that had started to spoil. Remember, there were no refrigerators back then!

Here's an important fact: spices are valuable but not heavy. Camels or horses can carry them across deserts or mountains. Spice traders could also go on ships along the coast. As a result, spices from India were part of ancient trading systems, even way back in Greek and Roman times. Today, India produces nine tenths of all spices sold in the world.

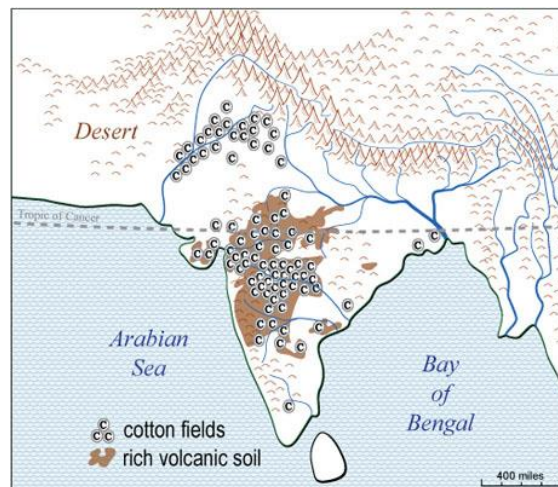
Monsoon climate is also good for growing cotton. Cotton plants need a long growing season. They also need a lot of water while their stems and leaves are growing. Then, when the plants are making cotton, it is better if it does not rain at all. Rain encourages attack by insect pests. Rain splashes mud, which makes cotton dirty. Muddy ground makes harvest difficult.

Fortunately, the rainy summer in South Asia usually changes quickly to a hot, dry autumn. Some parts of India also have rich soils from ancient volcanoes. This combination of conditions makes really good cotton. Not surprisingly, cotton from South Asia has been famous for centuries.

This map shows where people grow cotton in South Asia.

The map suggests that there are two different "cotton cultures."

- Some farmers depend on rain falling on the rich volcanic soil in central India.
- Others depend on irrigation in the floodplains of the Indus River in Pakistan.  
(Pakistan is in the northwest part of the subcontinent.)



People grew cotton near the Indus River more than 5000 years ago. The big boom in cotton farming, however, started in the 1700s, after the Industrial Revolution in Europe. At first, British factories used wool from sheep raised in cool parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Later, they imported wool from other *colonies* in Australia (see that chapter).

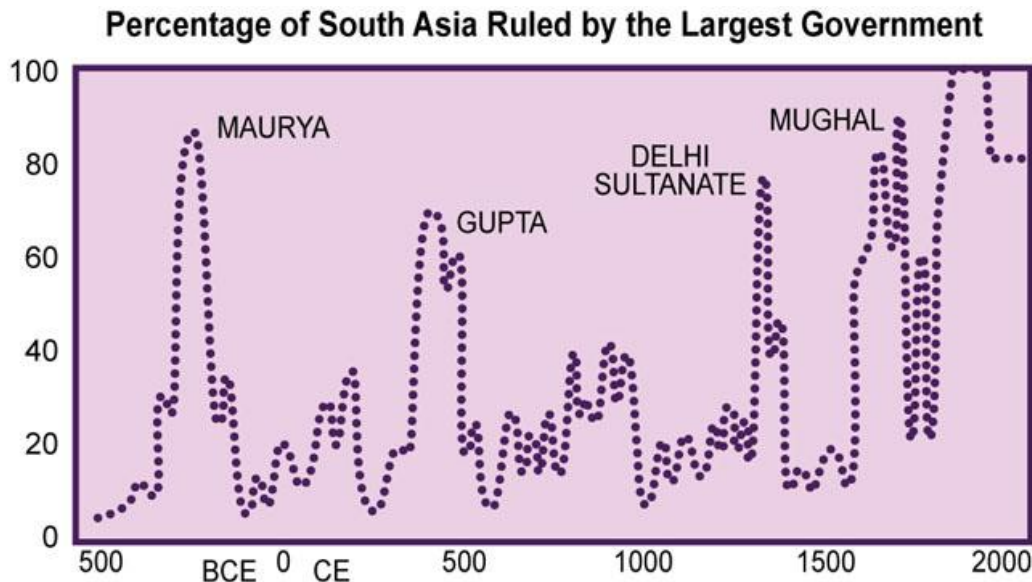
Definition: A **colony** is a distant land that is claimed and ruled by a powerful country. Many places around the world were once claimed as colonies by European countries, especially England, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands.

In 1793, Eli Whitney invented a **cotton gin**. This tool made cotton production much easier and cheaper. British factory owners started buying a lot of cotton from the United States. Cotton growing still required a lot of labor. That, in turn, supported a slave economy. This eventually led to the Civil War. See how things are connected geographically?

During and after the American Civil War, Britain bought cotton from South Asia. The British claimed the entire subcontinent of South Asia as a *colony*. Then they tried to impose parts of British culture on the region.

Here is an important point. When the British claimed South Asia as a colony in the 1800s, *it was the first time in history that a government tried to rule over the entire subcontinent.*

Most of the time, the largest “country” in South Asia covered less than a quarter of the area. Only four times in history did a government try to rule more than half of the subcontinent. This graph shows that none of these four governments lasted very long.



In other words, for most of its history, South Asia was divided into many small “countries.” People in these small countries often had different languages and other cultural ideas.

To help them govern this vast area, the British built a network of railroads. The railroads could move products like cotton or spices to the coast for export. They also made it easier for armies to move in order to enforce the law.

The British also started a banking system, using the same kind of money all over the country. They built telegraph lines. They built new schools and universities (with classes in English).

British influence was not all positive, however. British factory owners did not like competition from other cloth makers. To help the factory owners in Britain, the government made it illegal to make cotton into cloth in South Asia. As a result, Indian farmers had to ship their cotton to England. There, it was made into cloth in British factories. Some of the cloth was then made into clothing and shipped back to India for people to wear!

Many people in South Asia called policies like these unfair. This was one reason why people in South Asia wanted independence. They wanted to get rid of the English laws.

As in the United States, independence brought opportunities and problems.

For one thing, just keeping the country together was harder in South Asia than in America. In 1780, the new United States had about 3 million people living on 300,000 square miles of land. When the British left in 1947, South Asia had 390 million people and 2 million square miles. That is more than a hundred times as many people on eight times as much land.

This makes the job of a new government really hard!

In the next parts of this chapter, we will explore some of the cultural differences that made it impossible for all of South Asia to remain one country after the British rulers left.



### Consequence #3. Religious differences led to a Partition (split) after independence.

The main religion in India is Hinduism. Some people say that Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world. Four thousand years ago, it started among people in Central Asia. These people spoke a language in the Indo-European family, but they did not have writing.

They did have sacred texts, called *Vedas*. People memorized the words of the Vedas.

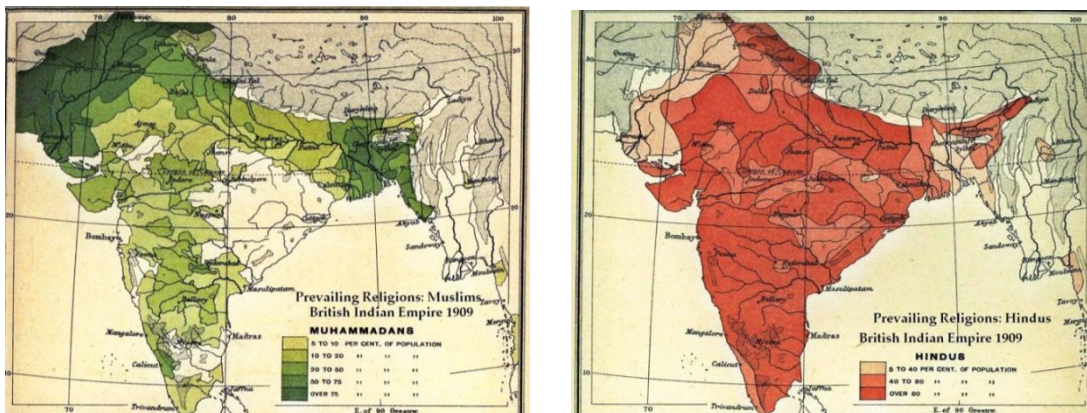
Meanwhile, people speaking Dravidian languages had lived in South Asia for thousands of years. Near the Indus River, they built large cities, with paved roads and sewer systems. The Dravidian people could write, but no one today can read their documents.

When the climate got cooler, the people in Central Asia started moving to warmer places like South Asia. They took control of the government in many parts of South Asia.

Fast forward about 2000 years. The invaders have learned about writing from the Dravidian people. They wrote down the Vedas, the basis for the religion now called Hinduism.

Meanwhile, a new religion called Islam started in Arabia, 2000 miles west. Islamic traders went to Europe, Africa, and even China. Eventually, Islamic armies invaded South Asia. They set up a government called the Delhi Sultanate. Soon, Muslim rulers controlled more than 3/4ths of the subcontinent.

Fast forward another 500 years. The British Empire now ruled all of South Asia as a colony. The people wanted independence. In 1909, a British officer made maps that show where people are mostly Muslims (also called Muhammadans, left map) and Hindus (right map).



These maps follow the general rule: *darker colors mean more of what a map is showing*. As you can see, most people in the middle of the area were Hindus. Most people in the northwestern and northeastern corners were Muslims. The British asked people whether they wanted to be one country or two. The answer was clear. Most Muslim people wanted their own country. They planned to call it Pakistan. (The word means “land of the pure.”)

The division of area was called the Partition. It was not easy. Millions of Muslims were living in the central part that would become India. Millions of Hindus lived in the two areas that would become Pakistan. The result was the largest mass migration in history. Millions of Muslims moved from India into Pakistan. Millions of Hindus moved from Pakistan into India. Riots broke out along the border. At least half a million people were killed.

In short, religious differences (one kind of cultural difference) ended the political unity of South Asia under British rule. These religious differences, however, are not the only important cultural differences in this complicated part of the world.

#### Consequence #4. Cultural and economic differences caused Pakistan to break apart.

In 1950, the new country of Pakistan already seemed hopelessly divided. The goal of Partition was to create a separate country for Muslim people in South Asia. They made one country by combining two separate areas with Muslim majorities.

Unfortunately, these two areas had different kinds of Muslims, with different cultures:

**West Pakistan** was mostly desert, with some rugged hills and mountains. Most people made a living by herding animals. A few farmers could grow cotton on irrigated fields near the Indus River. Most people spoke Urdu, a language related to Persian. Like people in Persia (now called Iran), many people in West Pakistan followed a strict kind of Islam. Today, some in this area even support terrorists in places like Iraq and Syria.

**East Pakistan** was flat and rainy. People grew rice and jute, a fiber used to make rugs. Most people spoke a language called Bengali. Their kind of Islam was influenced by Buddhism. It was very different from the Islam that people followed in West Pakistan. Today, most Muslims in this area condemn terrorists in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.

These cultural and environmental differences doomed the new country. East Pakistan voted to become an independent country. They called it Bangladesh – the land of the Bengali people.

Interesting fact: Bangladesh sends more troops than any other country to help the United Nations with peacekeeping projects.

Look at the relative position of Pakistan and Bangladesh on the map. Trace how rivers flow into and out of each country. These geographic relationships might lead to conflicts. For example, a chemical factory in one country might put pollution into a river before it flows into another country. Where do you think problems like this might occur?

Texas is printed as if it moved to South Asia but kept its correct size and latitude.

How big is Pakistan compared to Texas?  
Much of Pakistan is hot and dry, like West Texas.  
Pakistan has about 8 times as many people as Texas.

How big is Bangladesh compared to Texas?  
Bangladesh is hot and rainy, like East Texas.  
Though it is much smaller than Texas, Bangladesh has more than 6 times as many people. This country is really crowded!



**Consequence #5. People who speak different languages are likely to have other important cultural differences.**

When Aryan people moved into South Asia, many Dravidian people moved south. For many centuries, they resisted rulers from the north. Unlike the *subsistence farmers* of north India, the Dravidian people of the south were often involved in long-distance trade.

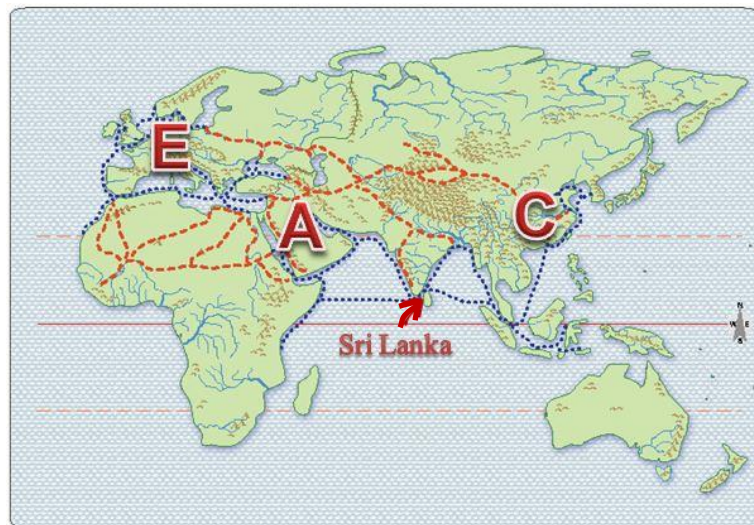
Definition: **Subsistence farmers** grow food for their own use, not to sell. Most subsistence farmers do not have much money to buy things from other people.

At the time of the Roman Empire, the Dravidian traders were really successful. They sold spices to people in Europe, Africa, and China. One trading city on Sri Lanka was one of the ten largest cities in the world.

This map shows trade routes in the Middle Ages.

The map clearly shows the strategic position of Sri Lanka. It is on the shipping routes that linked Africa, Europe, Arabia, India, and China (E, A, I, and C on this map).

This small area became the world's top trading area for pepper, spices, silk, and gold.



After independence and Partition, groups of Dravidian people in the south wanted their own country. The most famous group called themselves the Tamil Tigers. They wanted to make the island of Sri Lanka and part of nearby South India into a separate country. You can look in a history book or website for details about groups like the Tamil Tigers. Here, we just note that **separatist groups** like this often start because of cultural differences.

Definition: **Separatists** want to leave a country and start their own country.

**CAUTION:** It is wrong to conclude that cultural differences automatically lead to conflict or terrorism. South India has several other examples that point to a very different conclusion. For example, look at Kerala in southwestern India. This state has 33 million people. Most speak a Dravidian language called Malayalam. Kerala has the highest literacy rate in India. 95 percent of adults can read and write, many in both Malayalam and English.

The people are not rich. Family income is barely one tenth of the United States average.

BUT . . . medical care is excellent. People in Kerala live as long as in the United States. Classes in school are smaller than in the U.S. Unemployment is lower than in most states. In short, Kerala is a successful place. Economists are studying it, to find out how this culture can be so successful in spite of low money income.

**Consequence #6. Past economic relations can cause present cultural differences.**

Roughly once every three years, the sun, moon, and Jupiter line up in a certain way. At that time, many Hindus celebrate *Kumbh Mela*. They think that bathing in a river at this time will make a person pure. Bathing in the Ganges is seen as especially good. During Kumbh Mela:

- Many Hindus travel to the river in order to bathe in its water.
- They bring the ashes of dead people and scatter them on the water.
- They honor ancestors by lifting handfuls of water and letting it fall back into the river.
- They float clay dishes filled with burning oil and offerings of flowers.
- They carry some river water back home for use in religious rituals.



Nearly 30 million people came to the Ganges to bathe in its water on February 10, 2013.

Look up Kumbh Mela to get more information about this celebration.

Photo by Ron Mayhew

This situation is *ironic* in several ways.

Definition: An **ironic** statement is a way to make a point by saying the opposite. For example, you might say “just great” when you really mean you don’t like it. It all depends on how you say it – you have to use an ironic tone of voice!

The first irony is about the water in the Ganges River. People travel far to wash in the Ganges, but it is one of the most polluted rivers in the world. Nearly 400 million people live near it. Many houses do not have bathrooms. Many cities do not have good sewer systems. When the monsoon comes and the river floods, a lot of dirt and trash is washed into the river.

The second irony involves the history of the river. The Ganges is a sacred river to Hindus, but Islamic sultans built forts and palaces near the river (look up “Red Fort” on the internet). They paid for construction by taxing the Hindu farmers who lived on the Ganges floodplain.

Today, people near the Ganges River are generally poorer than people in the highlands and coastal cities. They have less education than people in other parts of India. Their families are larger, but medical care is worse. Death rates are higher. Women have fewer opportunities to go to school or get jobs.

In short, there are economic differences as well as cultural and language differences between the Ganges Valley, the cotton-growing Deccan Highlands, and the Dravidian areas in the south. People in these different regions tend to vote for different political parties.

Cultural differences, however, are even more serious in other regions of India. Read on!

**Consequence #7. The northern part of India has an especially serious cultural conflict.**

The Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir is not like the rest of the subcontinent. It is not a flat floodplain. It does not have volcanic soils and cotton fields. It is an area of mountains. While most of India is hot, the highlands are cool. Some people say the valleys in Kashmir have the most pleasant climate on earth.

This 1867 painting shows several of the key features about Kashmir,

- High mountains are visible through the window.
- People are making fine cloth from wool.
- People are wearing the clothing styles of Islamic people.



To see if things have changed, do an image search for “Kashmir scenes” or look at [kashmironline.net](http://kashmironline.net). You will see that many people still wear clothing like in the painting. Some people still raise sheep and goats. They harvest the wool to make fine cloth (Do you know about “cashmere” sweaters? “Cashmere” is just a different way to spell Kashmir!)

The mountains in the old painting, of course, are still there in Kashmir. The scenery attracts many tourists. Pictures of Kashmir often show streams, rivers, and waterfalls.

Think carefully about what you know already. You can probably predict a problem.

Jammu & Kashmir is a state in India, but the people are mostly Muslim. Their languages are like Persian, not Hindi or Dravidian. Many even have relatives in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Not surprisingly, many people in Kashmir would like to be independent, or even part of Pakistan rather than India. To complicate things even more, China claims part of the area.

The “Kashmir question” is not just a local matter. It could affect the whole world. The political status of Kashmir is especially serious because of this fact:

*Many places in the world have cultural divisions, BUT Kashmir is one of the few places where countries on both sides of a disputed border have nuclear weapons.*

Several times in recent years, Indian and Pakistani soldiers near the border have shot at each other. Fortunately, many people are working hard to keep the border arguments from **escalating** to a nuclear war.

Definition: **Escalating** means increasing, going up – like riding on an escalator!

**Consequence #8. Even small countries can have large cultural differences inside them.**

Look again at a map of country borders, like the one a few pages back. Notice how India stretches to the east. It nearly surrounds Bangladesh and the tiny mountain country of Bhutan. Remember, this eastern area is a land of steep hills, dense forests, and rushing rivers. Small groups of people are often isolated, and isolated people often develop different cultural ideas.

People in different parts of eastern India speak many different languages. They also follow different religions. Some are Muslim. Others are Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu.

Rather than listing a lot of details about specific places, let us just make a generalization:

Eastern India is very complicated, with many cultural differences.

**Nepal** is a long, thin country that is made up of two regions that are even thinner:

**A hot floodplain region** in the south. More than nine-tenths of the Nepalese people live in the low, flat land near the southern border. This area is part of the floodplain of the Ganges River. People there grow rice. They speak an Indo-European language. Most are Hindus.

**A cold mountain region** in the north. Most people in northern Nepal are Buddhists. They speak a language related to Chinese. On the steep slopes of the high mountains, they raise sheep, goats, and yaks. (They bring the animals down to the valleys during the winter). They make clothing and rugs out of the wool from these animals.

In short, Nepal is a small country with two very different cultures.

**Bhutan** is an even smaller country. Nearly all of it is mountainous. Not surprisingly, its economy and culture are like northern Nepal. Most people are Buddhist. They speak a language like Chinese. Their economy is based on raising sheep and goats. They make cloth and rugs out of wool. They also sell electricity to India. They make it with dams on their rivers (remember, it rains a lot when monsoon winds hit the mountains!)

Even though Bhutan has fewer than one million people, it still had cultural differences. In the 1990s, the government forced one fifth of the population to leave. These people, called the Lhotshampa, had a different language, clothing, and religious beliefs. They wanted a democracy instead of a kingdom.

In the 1980s, the Lhotshampa were a distinct cultural group inside a tiny mountain country in South Asia.

Today, because they wanted to keep a different culture, most of them are refugees living in another country!

Scene in the tiny country of Bhutan. The large building was built in 1646.  
Photo by Jean-Marie Hullot



**Consequence #9. Uneven technological progress can lead to cultural differences.**

Earlier, we described the mountains and deserts around South Asia. We called these features a kind of “natural fence” that kept the subcontinent somewhat isolated for thousands of years. People in South Asia developed many cultural differences. These differences made it hard to form a united government.

The colonial era had mixed effects. You can find details in a history book or internet site. Here, we want to note three effects that still affect life in South Asia.

1. **Transportation and Communication.** The British built a good railroad and telegraph system (compared to other colonial regions). These railroads help people move food and other supplies. This is especially important in times of flood or other crisis.
2. **Language.** The colonial governors also started schools that included English as a subject to study. You already know that people in different parts of India speak more than 20 different languages. Millions, however, can also read and write in English.
3. **Higher Education.** After independence, the government added some advanced technical schools. Millions of people have taken high-level classes in subjects like computer programming, chemical engineering, and movie production.

When you put these three ideas together, what do you get? India has a large number of well-educated people who can do many high-tech jobs. For example,

Companies in Mumbai make more movies than any other place in the world – even more than Hollywood! Part of Mumbai (it used to be spelled Bombay) is called “Bollywood.”

People in the city of Hyderabad gave it the nickname “Cyberabad” because of all the hi-tech jobs there. Hyderabad started as a Muslim city in Dravidian south India.

Geohistorical trivia: You see where Muslim people lived in South Asia by looking for town names that end in “abad” – it means “town” in Persian. (The name of the city of Islamabad has a double clue!)

Hi-tech jobs in Mumbai, Hyderabad, and other parts of India are helped by the fact that English is the main language of the Internet. People who speak English and have scientific training can get good jobs in engineering companies and other tech businesses. Have you ever called or emailed about a problem with a phone or computer? Chances are, the person who answered your call was from India!

In short, South Asia was isolated by mountains and deserts for thousands of years. Then came electricity, phones, and the internet. Now, it is no longer isolated. In fact, it has become the core of an international network of hi-tech industry, video, and electronic music.

Economic development, however, has created a new kind of cultural difference – a split between cities and rural areas. Many people in the growing cities are educated and wealthy. Meanwhile, people who live on subsistence farms or in small factory towns are often poor. This split is evident in nearly every developed country, from Europe to Japan, China, and the United States. (It’s like many countries have Bollywoods, Cyberabads, and rural poor!)

One huge challenge for all economically advanced countries is to figure out how to spread the benefits of economic growth fairly. This is especially hard in South Asia. This region has nearly one fourth of the people in the world. It also has many cultural differences that make it hard to write laws that are fair to everyone.

**Putting it all together.** Bangladesh is a small but very crowded country. It is especially vulnerable to floods because of a combination of conditions – cultural differences, colonial rule, flat land, monsoon climate, river flow, hurricanes, and rising sea level.

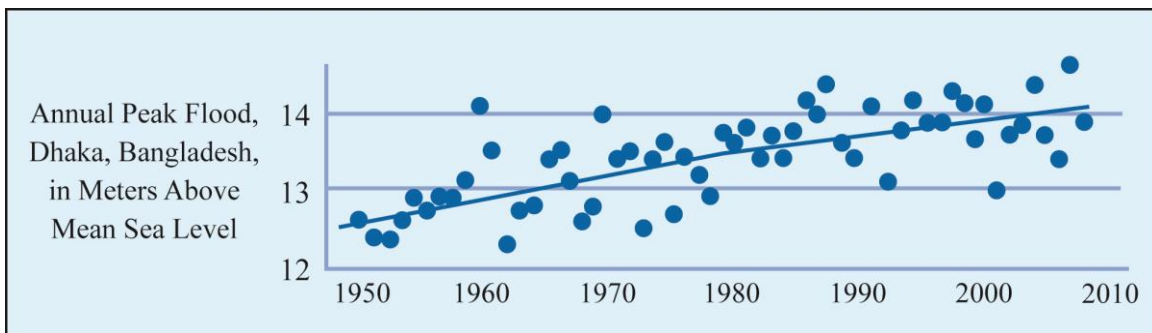
Let's play “what-if” for a minute:

- **If** South Asia were at different latitude, **then** there would be less rain to make floods.
- **If** the Indian Ocean were cooler, **then** the monsoon winds would bring less rain.
- **If** the Himalaya Mountains were not so high, **then** they would not get so much snow.
- **If** the land near the rivers were not low and flat, **then** the floods would not spread so far.
- **If** floodplain soil were less fertile, **then** fewer people would be living on the floodplain.
- **If** the British had drawn a different border between India and Bangladesh, **then** . . .

We could play IF-THEN games for a long time. But in the real world of cause and effect, Bangladesh has a big problem. It is about the size of Iowa, but it has fifty times as many people. This is the highest population density of any major country.

Most of the land is low and flat. Monsoon floods can cover large areas.

These floods are clearly getting deeper.



One reason is because people upstream in India and Nepal have cut many trees down. Trees use a lot of water. If people cut the trees down, the water has to go somewhere else. Much of it goes into the rivers, making the floods deeper!

Another problem is hurricanes. The Bay of Bengal is at the same latitude as Puerto Rico. Like Puerto Rico, southern Bangladesh has a lot of hurricanes. And sea level is rising.

Given these conditions, you might expect headlines about floods killing thousands of people. You might expect them, but you don't see them. The reason is simple – people of Bangladesh have made effective plans for flood prediction and evacuation. These plans involve a mix of government rules and private connections (like Sula's family moving to stay with relatives).

The plans work, but they cost a lot of money and time. This raises some difficult questions:

- What is a fair way to pay for flood-warning systems? How about for flood damage?
- What is fair, if one major cause of floods is tree cutting by people in India and Nepal?
- What is fair, if levees to protect one side of a river cause higher floods on the other?
- What is fair, if changes in monsoon rains, snowfall, hurricanes, and sea level are caused by people burning coal and oil in countries far away?

These are all geographic questions. To find fair answers, we need to study how natural and cultural systems interact. This research will require cooperative action by many countries.



**Summary – how can the big idea about culture help us understand South Asia better?**

**Basic cause:** Mountains, deserts, and canyons made a kind of “natural fence” that made it hard to travel to and from South Asia throughout much of its early history. People who are geographically isolated often develop unique ideas about how to live.

(The idea of *caste* is a good example – you can read more about it on many websites.)

A few times, however, people came in from outside and brought different cultural ideas into the region. Moreover, starting about 2000 years ago, some people near the coasts of the subcontinent also had a key position in trade networks.

**Big idea:** People with different cultures can choose to live differently even in places that have similar conditions.

**Study area:** South Asia is a good place to study the effects of culture. The combination of early isolation, occasional invasion, and colonial rule helped give the region a complex cultural geography.

**Consequence #1:** Seasonal winds called monsoons have an influence on travel, work schedules, festivals, religious beliefs, and many other cultural ideas.

**Consequence #2:** Great Britain tried to overcome cultural differences when it claimed the entire Indian subcontinent as a colony.

**Consequence #3:** Religion is a powerful kind of cultural difference. Religious differences led to a Partition of South Asia shortly after independence.

**Consequence #4:** Ways of making a living are also important cultural differences. They are part of the reason why Pakistan soon split into two countries.

**Consequence #5:** Language is a major part of culture. The old split between Dravidian and Indo-European language groups is still important in India.

**Consequence #6:** Patterns of population and wealth have complex causes. The crowded Ganges River floodplain was the core area of the Islamic sultanates, even though the Ganges is a sacred river for Hindus.

**Consequence #7:** Historical claims in places like Kashmir can cause conflict.

**Consequence #8:** Even small countries like Nepal and Bhutan can have cultural regions.

**Consequence #9:** Uneven technological progress can lead to cultural differences. Bollywood and Cyberabad are nicknames that reflect cultural divisions between modern cities and more traditional rural areas.

**Putting it all together.** Sula’s country of Bangladesh is small but very densely populated. It is especially vulnerable to floods because of a combination of conditions, including cultural differences, colonial rule, country borders, the monsoons, river flow patterns, flat land, hurricanes, and rising sea level.

The big geographic question is simple:

who should pay for flood damage in places like Bangladesh?

Remember, the causes of floods include land use in upstream countries and global warming caused by people burning fossil fuels in other parts of the world.

## Physical Geography Note: The Rivers of South and East Asia

In a contest between hard rock and a big river, the river usually wins. A big river is able to wear down the rocks in its path even while mountains are being pushed up around it. The resulting valleys are called *watergaps*. Some watergaps were very important in history.

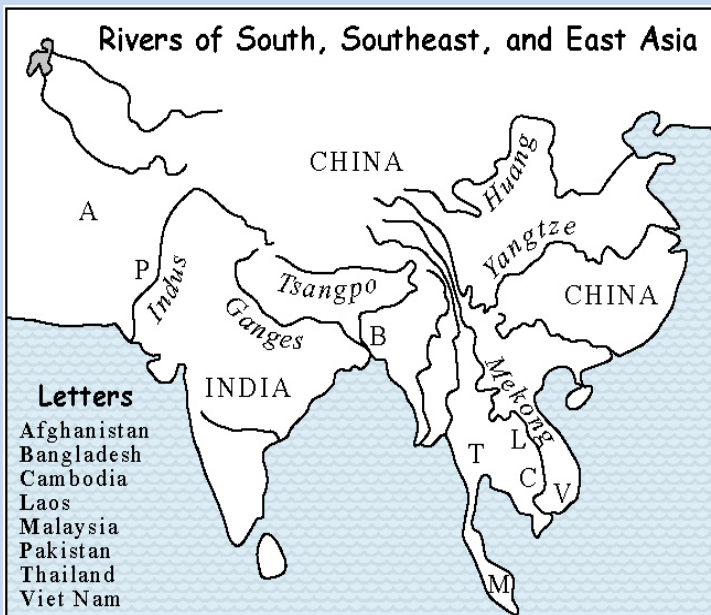
Definition: A **watergap** is a place where a large river can keep forming a valley even while mountain ridges are being pushed up around it. Watergaps are useful because people can travel along the river rather than climb over the mountains.

One famous watergap is Harpers Ferry, near Washington, DC. It was the focus of several key battles during the Civil War. You can look up its story on the internet.

What happens when rivers are not big enough to keep cutting valleys? The water has to go somewhere else. Some might flow into an inland lake, like the one in the northwest corner of the map below. This lake, the Aral Sea, is quite famous today, because it is disappearing. People are taking water from the rivers for irrigation, and the water in the lake is evaporating faster than the rivers bring more water in. You can read more about it on the Internet.

Look at the river called the Tsangpo. It starts as a creek on the dry side of the high Himalaya Mountains. It flows nearly 800 miles east until it finally can curve around the end of the high mountains. As it goes into India and then Bangladesh, it gets a new name, the Brahmaputra.

The Tsangpo/Brahmaputra River gains water rapidly after it flows around the end of the high mountains (remember, those hills get 20-40 feet of rain each summer!) When it joins the Ganges River in Bangladesh, it forms one of the great floodplains of the world. That combination of mountains, monsoon rains, and flat land is what makes the huge floods!



Here is another odd thing that was important in human history. Where the Brahmaputra curves around the mountains, you can see four other rivers running parallel to each other. Several of these rivers change their names as they go from one country to another. We won't bother with the details, in order to make some generalizations.

After flowing parallel to each other, these rivers separate and go in different directions. Two important rivers – the Mekong and the Yangtze – are nearly 2000 miles apart when they finally reach the ocean.

More than 50 million people live along these four rivers. As a result, these rivers are important as transportation avenues and sources of water. They also help to separate people into different groups, because travel is very hard going west-to-east across the rivers.

## Human Geography Note: The Demographic Transition

The chapter on China has a section about the typical changes in population that occur as a country develops. These changes are called the *demographic transition*.

Definition: the **demographic transition** is a change from a time of high birth rates and short lifespans to a time of low birth rates and long lifespans.

In the United States, for example, a typical woman in 1900 had almost 4 children, and a baby could expect to live about 50 years. A hundred years later, in 2000, an average woman had fewer than 2 children, and a baby could expect to live past age 75.

The middle of the demographic transition has an important combination of conditions. Medical advances have reduced the death rate, but the birth rate is still high. As a result, population grows rapidly. This happened in the United States in the mid-1900s (it was called the “Baby Boom”), and it is happening in South Asia right now.

The good news is that birth rates are going down. Families have fewer mouths to feed. As a result, people have more money left over to invest in education, new cars, furniture, computers, and so forth. These investments are helping the economies of South Asia to grow faster than the world average.

The bad news is that populations are still growing. Problems like food security, flooding, and air pollution are becoming worse.

The really bad news is that South Asia has a unique combination of conditions:

1. The borders between India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Iran do not fit well with ethnic, religious, and environmental conditions.
2. With high population densities and fairly rapid population and/or economic growth, all three countries need an increasing amount food, energy, and resources.
3. The countries are arguing about many issues (look up “Kashmir” on the internet).
4. Both India and Pakistan have nuclear weapons.

When you combine these four facts, you see a major challenge for South Asian countries. These issues have effects for diplomatic relations with many other countries (see photo).



Indian Agni-II ballistic missile on a road-mobile launcher at the Republic Day parade, January, 2004.

Photo by Agência Brasil

## Comparing the “super-countries” – China and India

For a long time, travel was hard between China and India.

Most people in one country had little contact with people in the other. As a result, they have different cultures – lifestyles, languages, religions, legal systems, buildings, cooking, art, music, and so forth.

A history book or website can give you more details about Chinese and Indian history. In this summary page, let us just note three quick facts about modern China:

- 1) China is a Communist country. It is ruled by a few men who are not elected by the people.
- 2) China had a Great Cultural Revolution. This was an attempt to “purify the thoughts of the people.” You can read about this time in history books or websites. It caused a lot of pain, and the effects are still noticeable.
- 3) China’s economy has been growing rapidly.



And here are three quick facts about India:

- 1) India was a former British colony. (That means it was a distant place that was captured and ruled by Great Britain.)
- 2) India was split from Pakistan and Bangladesh after it gained independence.
- 3) India calls itself the world’s largest democracy.



Both countries have well-educated people and rapid economic development.

Economic growth can lift many people out of poverty, but the effects are often uneven (remember the page about Bollywood and Cyberabad?).

Economic development also requires a lot of energy and mineral resources. (You can read more about resources in the chapters about Southwest Asia, Russia, and Australia).

These facts raise a big question for the future:

*Can the rest of the world supply enough resources for these giant countries?*

In one important way, China is ahead of India. During the past 30 years, China has been able to control population growth. In fact, its population is expected to go down in the future. The country may actually have a hundred million fewer people 30 years from today. (You can read more about population policy in the chapter about China.)

Meanwhile, India’s population continues to grow. Population growth is especially rapid in the poor areas near the Ganges River. In fact, India is expected to pass China as the world’s largest country soon. Eventually, its population must also stop growing.

Until that happens, the government of India has to deal many economic and environmental problems. “Equal justice for all” will be a big challenge for a country that calls itself the world’s largest democracy but has great cultural differences.

(And learning about their successes and failures will be useful for people in the world’s second largest democracy, the United States!)