

## Chapter 10

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

Culture is important in geography, 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.



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. The two Sulas are cousins. They both live in flood-prone areas near the same large river. They speak the same language and live in similar communities, but they live in different countries. These similarities and differences are like a personal summary of this complicated part of the world.

Sula and her family are moving most of their things upstairs. Later this afternoon, they will get on a bus to “visit” her aunt and uncle about fifteen miles away.

In a few days, the water in the river will start to rise. Eventually, it will spread across this flat land. Only the tops of trees and houses will stay above water. In a few weeks, the water will go down, and Sula’s family will come back 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 behave.  
(“Shared” means generally agreed upon by adults and taught to children.)

South Asia has many different groups of people. These groups have different cultural ideas. For example, several groups may have different ideas about how to deal with floods. Here are some of the possibilities:

**Move away.** Some people (like Sula’s family) just move away during the flood season. People in many other parts of the world have the same idea about how to deal with environmental problems. They simply leave their homes during cold winters, hot summers, or times when hurricanes are coming.

**Build higher.**

Some people build their houses up on stilts. This can keep things safely above the level of the water. People can use boats to travel during the flood season.

Photo by Shahnoor Habib Munmun



**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 the river. Like Noah in the Bible, they think floods are messages from God.

Religious ideas like these are an important part of culture. Hinduism is the main religion in India, 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 many different groups. So are Muslims. So are Buddhists. So are the people who follow other religions in South Asia. This fact is a key part of our story.

In this chapter, we look at what happens when people with different cultural ideas live in the same region. Where did different groups of people 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 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 human cultures, we make generalizations. General statements almost always have exceptions. As a result, the generalizations may not apply to individual people who happen to live in a particular area.

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

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

The heavy rains that cause floods on the Indian *Subcontinent* have many 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 two cars running into each other. Crustal plates move very slowly – less than two inches in a year. This is roughly as fast as your fingernails grow, but it is still fast enough to push rocks up and make mountains. Think about what happens if you lay a newspaper on the floor and slowly push it against a wall. The paper folds and crumples. In a similar way (but much slower), layers of rock are folded and crumpled. In South Asia, the result is the highest range of mountains in the world.

**Monsoons.** The second force is a seasonal wind called the *monsoon*. This wind blows from the Indian Ocean toward the land in summer. 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 come together to form the Ganges River, one of the largest in the world. As you already know, the Ganges is a sacred river for Hindu people.

### A geographical “laboratory” to investigate 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 snow-covered mountains stretching from New York to Texas? The Himalaya Mountains are like that. Only two roads cross this long mountain range. 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!

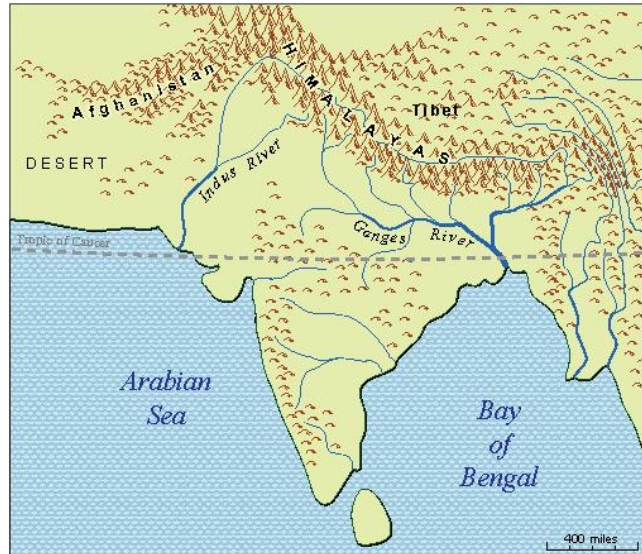
To the northwest are the mountains of Afghanistan. They are lower than the Himalayas, but they are still too rugged for easy travel.

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 natural fence around a large part of the earth, you could hardly do a better job 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.



Here are seven major historic events that helped shape the cultural patterns in South Asia:

1. About 80,000 years ago, humans began moving out of Africa. Sea level was low, and they could walk on flat land near the coast. They reached South Asia about 65,000 years ago.
2. About 3000 BCE, people began irrigating crops in the Indus Valley. Their civilization lasted more than a thousand years. These people spoke a language called Dravidian.
3. About 1500 BCE, many people moved out of central Asia. Some went west into Europe. Others went southeast and invaded India. These people spoke Indo-European languages.
4. Around 300 BCE, armies came from Persia and Greece (remember Alexander the Great?)
5. Several times around the year 1, different people invaded from Central Asia. These people were pushed southward by the Xiongnu people who lived still farther north.
6. Around 1000 CE, Muslim armies from Persia began raiding in South Asia. By 1200 CE, they had started an Islamic *sultanate* (government) that ruled much of the subcontinent.
7. In 1498, Vasco de Gama sailed from Europe to India. Soon, European countries started to claim colonies in South Asia. By the mid-1870s, England ruled most of the subcontinent.

Each invader brought new cultural ideas – but they didn’t replace all the older ideas. Some features of South Asian culture (like the idea of *caste*) have remained important for centuries.

Definition: In a **caste** system, your job depends on your family. People in the Brahmin caste became priests and leaders. People in lower castes did jobs like farmer or street sweeper. There were many castes, and you had to marry someone of your caste.

**Consequence #1: Cultures in South Asia are strongly influenced by the monsoons.**

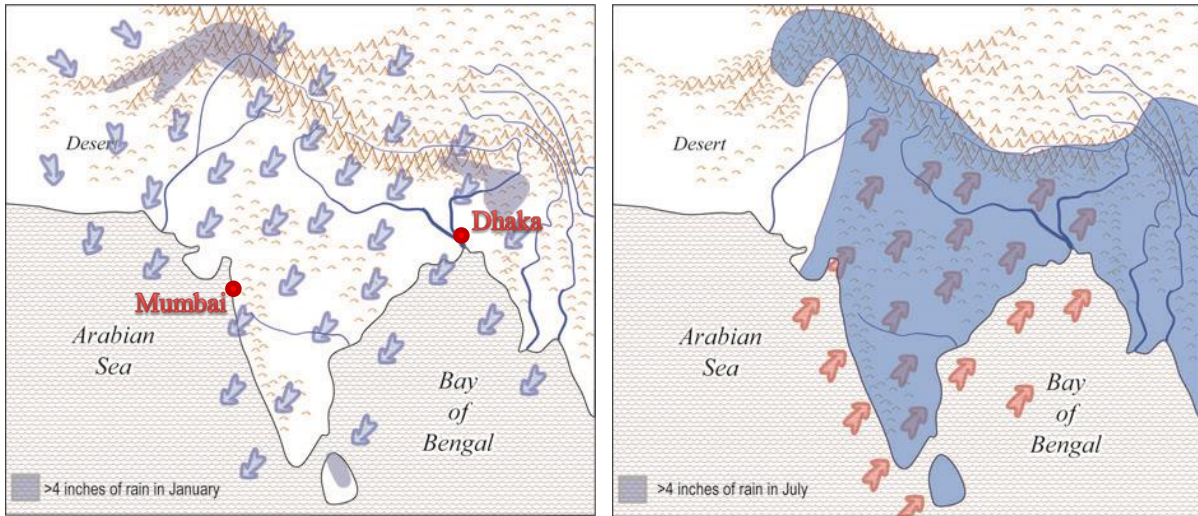
Most of South Asia is very hot. It rarely freezes or snows, except in the northern mountains. In Mumbai, the average midday temperature is 89 degrees in December and 90 degrees in June. This giant city is an important port on the west coast. (Some old maps call it Bombay.)

South Asia does not get cold in winter. Summer and winter, however, have very different amounts of rain. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, has more than 15 million people. It gets only 2 inches of rain from November to February. From May to August, by contrast, the city gets nearly 70 inches. That is about twice what Chicago gets all year.

These rains have an influence on temperature. Many places in southern India have average highs above 100 in May. Then the monsoon clouds and rains come to cool things down a bit.

The seasonal differences get even more extreme when monsoon winds blow up the sides of mountains. For example, there is a hilly area about 200 miles northeast of Dhaka. Like Dhaka, this hilly area gets about 2 inches of rain in winter. In summer, however, it gets more than 300 inches of rain (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. They can affect work schedules, travel plans, festivals, and even religious beliefs. And, as noted 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.
- 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. (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 system. Unfortunately, many textbooks and internet sites 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 this, read the two “science boxes” on the next page).

### The Causes of the Monsoon

**In winter**, the sun is overhead near the Tropic of Capricorn. The Equatorial Rainy Belt is in the southern hemisphere. The jet stream blows south of the Himalaya Mountains. The middle of Asia is cold. Air pressure is high. Surface winds usually blow toward the ocean. The land gets little rain. *Dry winter is one effect of a long chain of causes.*

**In summer**, the sun is overhead near the Tropic of Cancer. The Equatorial Rainy Belt is in the northern hemisphere. The jet stream is pushed north of the Himalayas. The continent is warm. Air pressure is low. Surface winds usually blow from the ocean onto the land. These bring a lot of rain. *Rainy summer is one effect of a long chain of causes.*

The real key is a very short period of time in spring, when the jet stream suddenly shifts its position. It starts blowing around the northern side of the Himalaya Mountains. When that happens, the Equatorial Rainy Belt moves quickly north.

The main result is easy to describe. After months of hot, dry weather, the wind starts to blow from the ocean, and it brings a lot of rain. The rainwater joins with melting snow from the mountains. The result is often a huge flood in India and Bangladesh.

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

The South Asian monsoon has many consequences. It has obvious effects on plants and animals. It has a strong influence on farming. It affects construction, transportation, and recreation. (Who wants to play soccer outdoors where it rains three 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 monsoon.

### Global Warming and the Monsoon

Even if you do not remember all the details, remember this: *The South Asia monsoon is a very complex system of temperatures, air pressures, winds, mountains, and rain.* It can sometimes be hard to see how local weather fits in large systems. Moreover, the monsoons are changing. Many scientists say the changes are a result of global warming.

In this book, we will not try to make a complete explanation of global warming. Note, however, that people on all sides of global warming “debates” talk about the monsoon. Changes observed in the Himalaya Mountains and nearby lowlands include:

- 1) Glaciers in many areas seem to be melting faster than before.
- 2) Snowfall has increased in some areas; this causes a few glaciers to expand.
- 3) The dry season lasts longer in some places; this causes more rivers to dry up.
- 4) The rainy season starts sooner in some places; this causes earlier floods.
- 5) Floods have gotten stronger in some places; this causes longer floods.
- 6) Hurricanes are more frequent or stronger in some places.
- 7) Hurricanes are less frequent in some other places.
- 8) Sea level is rising and flooding low-lying coastal areas.
- 9) High sea level is pushing saltwater into some parts of the Ganges Delta.
- 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 in this book. At the end of this chapter, however, we will ask a messy question: if the monsoon really is changing because of global warming, who should pay for the flood damage? Who should pay the costs of adjusting to the other changes?

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

The monsoon climate of South Asia 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 a really important fact: spices are valuable but not heavy. Camels or horses could carry them across deserts or mountains. Spice traders could also travel 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.

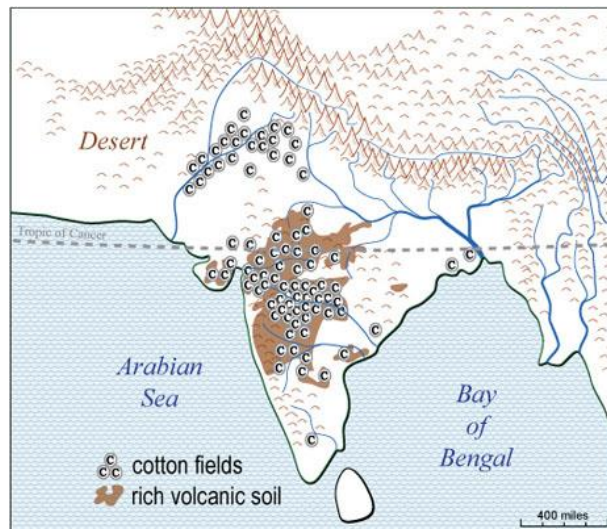
Monsoon climate is also good for growing cotton. Cotton plants need at least 200 frost-free days. They also need a lot of water while their stems and leaves are growing. Then, when the plants are actually making cotton, it is better if it does not rain at all. Rain encourages insect attack. Rain splashes mud, which makes cotton dirty. Muddy ground makes harvest difficult.

Fortunately, the rainy monsoon summer usually changes quickly to a hot, dry autumn. Some parts of India also have rich soils from ancient volcanic eruptions. 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.)



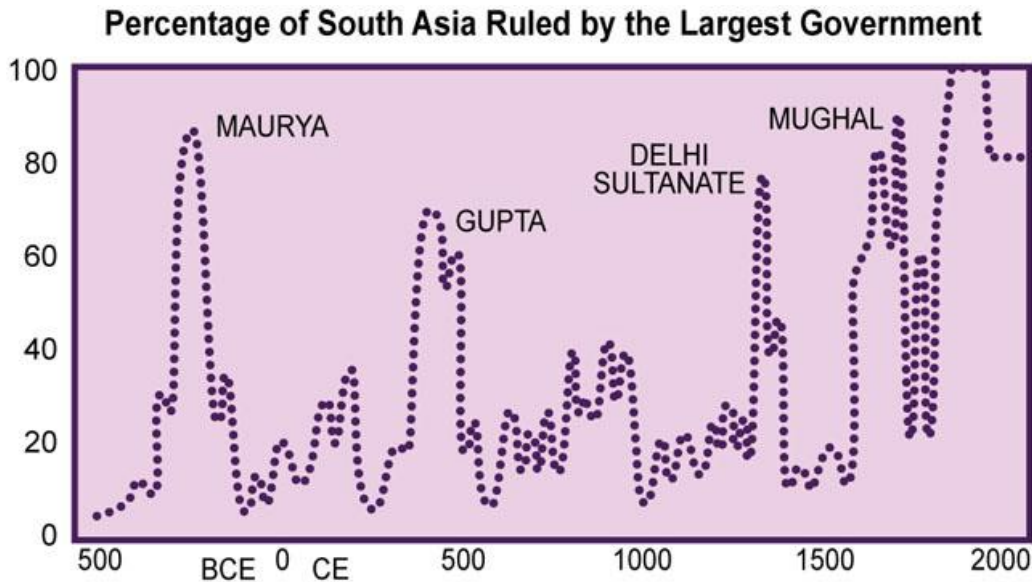
Cotton was grown in Indus Valley more than 5000 years ago. The big boom in cotton farming, however, started after the Industrial Revolution in Europe. At first, British factories depended on wool from sheep raised in cool parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Later, they imported wool from other *colonies* in Australia and New Zealand.

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, and the Netherlands (home of the Dutch people).

Then, 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 United States. Cotton growing still required a lot of labor. That, in turn, supported the slave economy, which 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. Partly to keep a supply of cotton for its factories, Britain invaded South Asia. Eventually, it claimed the entire subcontinent as a *colony*. Then it tried to impose parts of British culture on the region.

Here is an important point to remember. When the British government claimed all of South Asia as a colony, *it was the first time in history that a single government ruled 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 single ruler claim more than half of the subcontinent. This graph shows that none of these 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. They had different religions, laws, and ways of making a living.

The British tried to make South Asia into a single colony. For example, they built a national network of railroads. The railroads made it easier to get 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. They issued a single currency (kind of money). They built telegraph lines. They built new schools and universities (with classes in English).

The British influence was not all positive, however. British factory owners did not want competition from other cloth makers. To help the factory owners, the British 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. The laws were designed to save factory jobs in Britain, even if they caused problems in South Asia. This was one reason why South Asian people wanted independence. They wanted to get rid of the English laws.

As in the United States, independence brought both opportunities and problems. One big challenge was to keep the new country together. This was much harder in South Asia than in America. Consider these facts: In 1780, the new United States had about 3 million people and 300,000 square miles of land. When the British left in 1947, South Asia had 390 million people and 2 million square miles. That’s more than a hundred times as many people on eight times as much land. That’s a much harder job for a brand-new government!

In the next several sections, we will explore some of the cultural differences that made it impossible for South Asian people 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 Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world. Four thousand years ago, it started among the Aryan people in Central Asia. These people spoke a language called Indo-European, but they did not have writing.

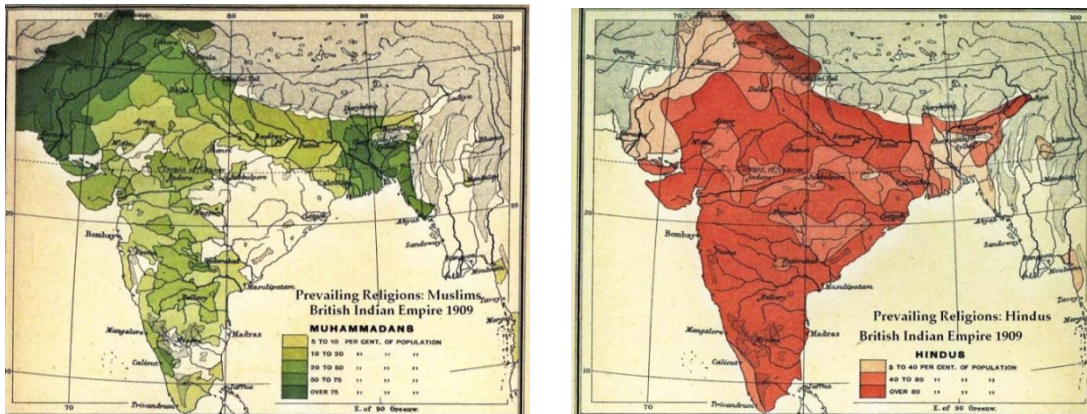
They did have sacred texts, called *Vedas*. People memorized the words of the Vedas. In this way, Aryan parents taught these texts to their children.

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

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

Fast forward about 2000 years. Aryan people have learned the idea of writing from the Dravidian people. They used it to copy the Vedas. This became the basis for the religion that is now known as Hinduism. Meanwhile, a new religion called Islam started in Arabia. Islamic traders traveled from Arabia to Europe, Africa, even China. Eventually, Islamic armies came into South Asia. They set up a government called the Delhi Sultanate. Soon, Muslim rulers controlled nearly all of the northern part of the subcontinent.

Fast forward another 500 years. The British Empire now rules all of South Asia as a colony. The people want independence. In 1909, a British officer makes maps that show where people are mostly Muslims (also called Muhammadans, on the 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 human history. Many Muslims moved from India into Pakistan, and Hindus from Pakistan into India. Nearly 14 million crossed the borders in one year. Riots broke out, and 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 seemed hopelessly divided. This country was formed by the Partition of British India in 1947. The goal was to create a separate country for Muslim people in South Asia. Unfortunately, different areas had different kinds of Muslims. The Partition made two separate areas with Muslim majorities into one country.

Here are some ways the two main parts of Pakistan were different:

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 the old 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 follow a strict kind of Islam. Today, some in this area even support terrorists in places like Iraq and Syria.

East Pakistan was flat and really rainy. People grew rice on flooded fields. Their main export was jute, a strong fiber used to make rugs. Most of the people spoke a language called Bengali. Their kind of Islam was influenced by Buddhism. It was very different from what people followed in West Pakistan. Today, most Muslims in this area condemn the violent 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 these two countries on the map. Note their neighbors, and 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. It's 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. Even though it is much smaller, Bangladesh has more than 6 times as many people as Texas.

These are really crowded countries!



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

You already know that the British rule was unique. Before the British, no single government ever ruled all of South Asia. When Aryan people moved in from the north, many Dravidian people moved south. For many centuries, they resisted rulers from the north.

After independence and Partition, groups of Dravidian people also wanted their own country. The most famous group called themselves the Tamil Tigers. They wanted to make at least part of the island of Sri Lanka and nearby South India into a separate country. Their reasons were rooted in culture, language, and history. Most people in the south still speak a Dravidian language. Unlike the *subsistence farmers* of north India, the people of the south were also involved in long-distance trade for many centuries.

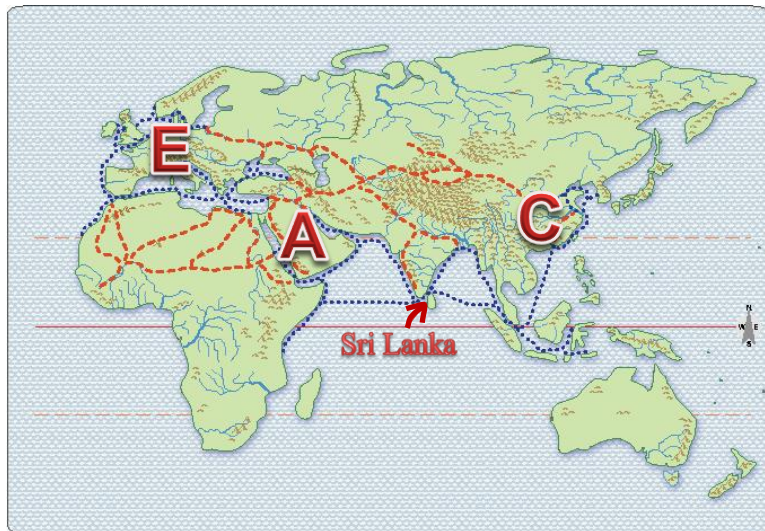
Definition: **Subsistence farmers** grow food for their own use, not to sell. Most subsistence farmers do not have much money to buy things from other people.

At the time of the Roman Empire, the Dravidian people were really successful. They sold spices to people in Europe, Africa, and China. One trading city on Sri Lanka became 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 went between Europe, Arabia, Africa, and China (E, A, and C on this map).

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



You can look in a history book or website for details about groups like the Tamil Tigers. Here, we just note that **separatist groups** often start because of cultural differences.

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

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 the state of Kerala in the southwestern part of India. It has 33 million people.

Most Keralans 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.

People in Kerala 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. The Human Development Index is the highest in South Asia. In short, this is a very successful place. Economists call it the Kerala Phenomenon. They 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 and rose petals.
- 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** situation seems like the opposite of what you expect. An ironic statement is a way to make a point by saying something nearly opposite. It is like calling something “just great” when you really mean you don’t like it!

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 complete sewer systems. When the monsoon rains come and the river floods, a lot of dirt and trash is washed into the river.

The second irony is the history of the river. The Ganges is sacred to Hindus, but the Islamic sultans built forts and palaces near the river. They paid for the construction by taxing the Hindu farmers who lived on the Ganges floodplain. Hindus on the Deccan Plateau resisted the Islamic invaders (The Deccan is the area of volcanic soil south of the Ganges – remember the cotton map?) The Dravidian people of South India also resisted the Islamic sultanates.

Today, people near the Ganges River are more crowded and generally poorer than people in the highlands and coastal cities. The people on the floodplain have less education than in other parts of India. Their families are larger, but medical care is not as good. Death rates are higher. Women have fewer opportunities.

In short, there are economic differences as well as cultural and language differences between the Ganges Valley, the Deccan Highlands, and the Dravidian areas in the south. People in these regions tend to vote for different political parties. Cultural differences, however, are even more serious in some other regions of India. Read on!

**Consequence #7. Historical claims underlie some important cultural conflicts.**

The Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir is not like the rest of the subcontinent. It is not a wide 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, of course, are still there. The scenery in Kashmir attracts many tourists. Pictures of Kashmir often show streams, rivers, and waterfalls.

Think carefully about this picture and these paragraphs. You can probably predict a problem. Jammu & Kashmir is a state in India, but the people who live there are mostly Muslim. They speak languages that are like Persian, not like Hindi or Dravidian. Many people in Kashmir even have relatives in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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

Feelings are strong, but we will not try to make a map to show these differences. The sad truth is that some American scholars are no longer allowed to travel to Kashmir. Some government officials disagree with maps or statements that these scholars made. They refuse to give the scholars permission to enter the country. So . . . you can look on the internet to find maps of Kashmir – we are not going to put one in this book!

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 armies on both sides of a disputed border have nuclear weapons.*

Remember who drew this border – the British! 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. This eastern part of India has a very complicated mixture of cultures. Remember, travel in this area is difficult. It 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.

In eastern India, people in different places speak many different languages. Some are Muslim. Others are Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu. Rather than trying to make a complete description, let us just make a generalization: eastern India is complicated, with many cultural differences.

**Nepal** has a simpler geographic pattern. This long, thin country is actually made up of two equally long but even thinner regions:

**A hot floodplain region.** More than nine-tenths of the people of Nepal live in the low and nearly flat southern half of the country. This area is part of the Ganges river floodplain. People there grow rice. They speak an Indo-European language. Most are Hindus.

**A cold mountain region.** Northern Nepal is mountainous. Most people are Buddhists. They speak a language related to Chinese. They grow fruit trees on the low hills. In 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.

Science fact: The line between these regions is quite sharp. The edge of the mountain region is a *geologic fault*, where rocks slip past each other. Earthquakes occur when rocks slip along faults. Remember, the subcontinent is colliding with the rest of Eurasia.

**Bhutan** is an even smaller country. Nearly all of it is north of the fault line. That means it is mostly mountains. Not surprisingly, its people and culture are like northern Nepal. Most 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 the Lhotshampa people (one fifth of the population) to leave. 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 them a kind of “natural fence” that kept the subcontinent somewhat isolated for thousands of years. People developed a variety of cultural differences that made it hard to form a united government. That, in turn, made it hard for South Asians to resist European colonists.

As a result, the British Empire had stronger control over South Asia than over most of its other colonies. 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. Hyderabad was a Muslim city in Dravidian south India. In fact, the last part of its name means “town” in Persian. You can tell where Islamic armies invaded by looking for “-abads” on a map. The name of the city of Islamabad has a double clue!

Hi-tech industry in India has been helped by the fact that English is the language of the Internet. People who speak English and have scientific training can get good jobs. They work in engineering firms and other tech businesses. Have you ever called or emailed about a problem with a phone or computer? Chances are, the person who answered was from India!

This is a strange-but-true geographic fact. India is in a part of the world that was isolated by mountains and deserts for thousands of years. Then came electricity, telephones, and the internet. Now, South Asia is no longer isolated. In fact, it has become the core of an international network of hi-tech industry, video production, 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 still 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 their own Bollywoods and Cyberabads!)

One huge challenge for all economically advanced countries is to figure out how to spread the benefits of economic growth fairly among all the people. This is especially hard in countries like India, Pakistan, or Bangladesh. Together, these big countries have more than one fourth of all the people in the world. Within these huge populations are many cultural differences. These differences make it hard to write laws and policies that are fair to everyone.

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

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

As a result, these two countries had very different histories. They have different cultures – different lifestyles, languages, religions, legal systems, 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 small group of 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 on the internet. It caused a lot of pain for many people, and the effects are still noticeable.
- 3) China is now becoming a more open market economy.

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 now 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 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, it has been able to control the growth of population. In fact, the population of China is expected to go down in the future. The country may actually have a hundred million fewer people 30 years from today.

Meanwhile, the population of India 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 will also reach a peak and start to decline. When people become wealthier and better educated, they are less likely to want large families.

In the meantime, the government of India has to deal with large cultural differences within the country. “Equal justice for all” will continue to be a big challenge for a country that calls itself the world’s largest democracy.

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



**Putting it all together.** Bangladesh is a small but crowded country. It is especially vulnerable to floods because of a combination of conditions – cultural differences, colonial rule, 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 border between India and Bangladesh had been drawn differently, **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 – the highest population density of any major country.

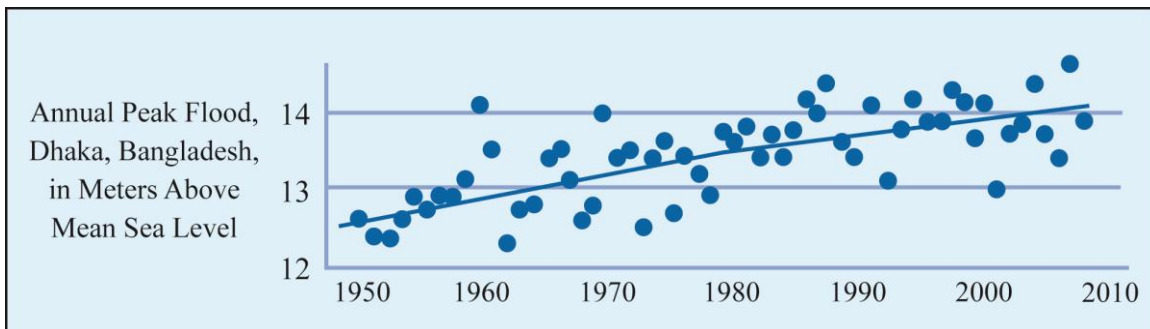
It is also very flat and low. Much of Bangladesh is less than 20 feet above sea level. As a result, much of the land is under water during the monsoon floods.

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

Bangladesh is surrounded by India on three sides. On the south side, it touches the Bay of Bengal. This bay of the Indian Ocean is at the same latitude as Puerto Rico. Like Puerto Rico, Bangladesh gets a hurricane every few years.

It’s time to “connect the dots.” When huge, monsoon-filled rivers flow across low-lying land that also has hurricanes, the result can be some bad floods.

Now add another fact – sea level is rising. The result is a really scary trend. Floods keep getting deeper every decade. Remember the pictures and stories at the start of this chapter?



Given these conditions, you might expect headlines about thousands of people killed by floods. You might expect headlines like this, but you don’t see them. The reason is simple – the people of Bangladesh have made effective plans for flood prediction and evacuation.

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

- Is it fair to make people in Bangladesh pay for flood-warning systems and flood damage?
- Is it fair, if one major cause of floods is tree cutting by people in India and Nepal?
- Is it fair, if changes in monsoon rains, snowfall, sea level, and hurricanes 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.

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

**Ultimate cause:** People who are geographically isolated may develop different ideas about how to live. Mountains and deserts made a kind of “natural fence” that made it hard to travel to and from the Indian subcontinent throughout much of its history. As a result, people in South Asia developed some cultural ideas that are different from anywhere else in the world. (The idea of *caste* is a good example – you can read more about it in many internet sites.)

**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 Himalaya Mountains and deserts made travel to this region very difficult in the past. A few times, however, outside groups came in and brought different cultural ideas into the region.

**Consequence #1:** Seasonal winds called monsoons are an important influence on many cultural ideas in South Asia. These seasonal differences have an influence on work schedules, travel, festivals, and religious beliefs.

**Consequence #2:** Great Britain tried to overcome many 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 immediately after independence.

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

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

**Consequence #6:** Present-day 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 underlie many cultural issues.

**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 traditional rural areas and more modern cities.

**Comparing the two “super-countries”** – China and India each have more than a billion people. Their religions, political systems, and other cultural features are very different. Both economies are now growing rapidly. This is lifting many people out of poverty, but it is also putting a lot of strain on resources and the environment.

**Putting it all together.** Sula’s country of Bangladesh is small but 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, 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.

### Extra Physical Geography Note: The Rivers of Southeast Asia

In a contest between a 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.

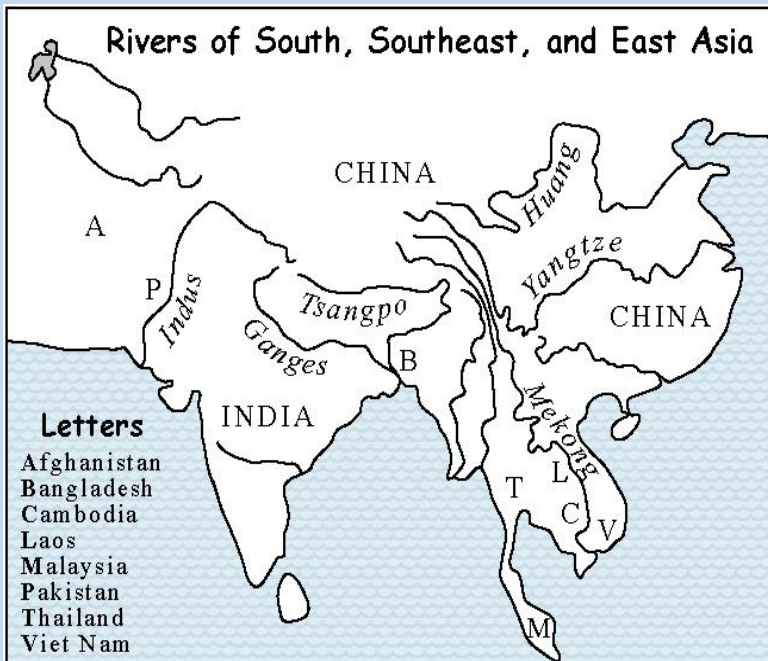
Definition: A **watergap** is a place where a large river can keep forming a valley even while mountain ridges are being pushed up around it. People can travel along the river without having to climb over the mountains.

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. That lake, the Aral Sea, is quite famous today, because it is disappearing. People are removing water from the rivers for irrigation, and the water in the lake is evaporating faster than the rivers bring it 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. Together, these two rivers drain less than half as much area as the Mississippi-Missouri-Ohio River system, but they carry more than twice as much water. That's 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.

These rivers flow parallel to each other, less than a hundred miles apart. Then they 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.

### Extra 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, the average woman in 1900 had almost 4 children, and a newborn girl could expect to live about 50 years. A hundred years later, in 2000, average women had fewer than 2 children, and a newborn girl could expect to live to age 80.

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, and it is happening in all countries of South Asia right now.

The good news is that birth rates are going down. As a result, families have fewer mouths to feed. This has another important effect: 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, and Bangladesh were drawn by a colonial power, Great Britain, on the basis of religion.
2. With very high population densities, all three of these countries need a lot of 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 can see a major challenge for South Asian countries. These issues also 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