

Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?

Summary

South Asia is a region of eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Together they were home to about 1.99 billion people in 2025, roughly one in four people on Earth. This chapter explains the difference between a region, a subcontinent and a country, then tours the land itself: the mountain walls in the north, the three great rivers, the plains, plateau, desert and coasts, and the monsoon that brings most of the year's rain. By the end you'll be able to find all eight countries on a map and explain why so many people live where they do.

Concepts Covered

1. South Asia
2. Indian Subcontinent
3. SAARC
4. Himalaya
5. Hindu Kush
6. Indus River
7. Ganges (Ganga) River
8. Brahmaputra River
9. Indo-Gangetic Plain

10. Deccan Plateau
11. Western and Eastern Ghats
12. Thar Desert
13. Monsoon
14. Bay of Bengal
15. Indian Ocean
16. Population of South Asia
17. Regional Diversity

Prerequisites

None, just curiosity. It helps to know north, south, east and west on a map, and that's all.

Welcome to Roots & Rivers!



Hi, I'm Mora! If your family is from South Asia, people have probably asked you "So where are you *really* from?" and expected a one-word answer. This chapter gives you the map you need to answer that question your own way, and it helps your friends ask better questions too. Every tradition has a story. Let's find it!

1.1 "Wait, Isn't Bangladesh Part of India?"

It's a Tuesday after school, and Zara Hossain and Ben Lindqvist are sitting in Ms. Okafor's classroom at Prairie Ridge High School. Zara is co-founding the

school's South Asian Student Association, and the first meeting is in two weeks. Ben, her best friend since fourth grade, has already signed up as the club's first member who isn't South Asian. Ms. Okafor, their faculty advisor, has asked them for one thing: a single slide that answers "What counts as South Asia?"

Ben is typing notes. "Okay, so your parents are from Bangladesh. That's part of India, right? Like a state?"

Zara opens her mouth to say no, then stops. She knows Bangladesh is its own country. Her parents grew up in Chattogram, a port city in Bangladesh, and her Nanu (her mother's mother) still tells stories about it at dinner. But Zara has also heard her uncle say "the subcontinent," and her cousin in London say "South Asian," and a relative call everyone from that part of the world "desi." She realizes she can't explain the difference between a country, a subcontinent and a region. If the words themselves are confusing, how is one slide supposed to clear them up? This chapter is that slide, in long form.

1.2 Region, Subcontinent, Country: Three Different Words

Ben already knows this idea from his own family. His family's roots are in Sweden and Norway, two separate **countries**, each with its own government, flag and laws. People also talk about "Scandinavia," a **region** that groups those countries (and usually Denmark) because they share some history and culture. Nobody thinks Norway is "part of Sweden" just because both are in Scandinavia.

South Asia works the same way.

- A **country** is a political unit with its own government and borders. India is a country. So is Bangladesh.

- A **region** is a group of places that people choose to talk about together, because of geography, history, culture or politics. Regions don't have governments.
- A **continent** is one of the very large landmasses, like Asia or Africa. A **subcontinent** is a large, distinct part of a continent.

South Asia is the region in the south of the Asian continent made up of eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the members of SAARC (Section 1.3). It's a geographic and political label, and it doesn't put any one country at the center.

The **Indian Subcontinent** is an older, more physical term for the big wedge of land south of the Himalaya that pushes out into the Indian Ocean, between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. It sits on its own tectonic plate (Section 1.5). Today that wedge is divided mainly among India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, with Nepal and Bhutan along its northern edge and Sri Lanka just off its tip. Afghanistan is usually not counted as part of the subcontinent. In short, "subcontinent" describes the land, and "South Asia" describes a group of countries.

Term	What kind of thing	What it includes	Who often uses it
South Asia	A region of countries	Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka	Governments, the World Bank, the United Nations, most universities in North America
Indian Subcontinent	A physical landmass	The land south of the Himalaya: mainly India, Pakistan and	Geologists, historians, many people in the UK

Term	What kind of thing	What it includes	Who often uses it
		Bangladesh, plus Nepal and Bhutan; Sri Lanka is often included	and in South Asian families
India	A country	One country, with 28 states and several union territories	Everyone, for that one country

Why "Indian"? For centuries, outsiders used "India" to mean the whole land around and beyond the Indus River, and historians still sometimes write "India" for the whole subcontinent before 1947. Since 1947, though, India has been the name of one modern country. That's why many people prefer "South Asia" for the region: it doesn't make one country's name stand for everyone.

Try this



Notice how Zara's family uses its own word for home. In Bangla, দেশ (DAYSH), "desh," means "country" or "homeland," and the word is even inside the name Bangladesh. When your family says "back home," which do they mean: a village, a city, a country or a region?

1.3 Eight Countries and SAARC

So which countries count? The answer most governments and researchers use comes from a regional organization.

SAARC, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, is a group the countries of the region set up to work together on trade, health, education and culture. It was founded in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, on 8 December 1985 by seven countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Afghanistan joined as the eighth member in 2007. SAARC's secretariat (its main office) is in Kathmandu, Nepal. SAARC's leaders last met for a full summit in Nepal in 2014. The next summit, planned for Pakistan in 2016, was postponed and, as of October 2026, has not been held. Even so, "the SAARC countries" is still the most common way to define South Asia.

Here are the eight countries, listed alphabetically. Population numbers are for 2025 from the World Bank.

Country	Capital	Population (2025, World Bank)	Main language(s)
Afghanistan	Kabul	43,844,111 (about 44 million)	Pashto and Dari
Bangladesh	Dhaka	175,686,899 (about 176 million)	Bangla (Bengali)
Bhutan	Thimphu	796,682 (about 800,000)	Dzongkha

Country	Capital	Population (2025, World Bank)	Main language(s)
India	New Delhi	1,463,865,525 (about 1.46 billion)	Hindi and English are official; 22 languages are listed in the Constitution's Eighth Schedule
Maldives	Malé	529,676 (about 530,000)	Dhivehi
Nepal	Kathmandu	29,618,118 (about 30 million)	Nepali
Pakistan	Islamabad	255,219,554 (about 255 million)	Urdu (national language) and English (official); Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki, Balochi and others are widely spoken
Sri Lanka	Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte (legislative)	21,756,000 (about 22 million)	Sinhala and Tamil

Country	Capital	Population (2025, World Bank)	Main language(s)
	and Colombo (executive)		

The sizes are very uneven: India alone has more people than the other seven countries put together. The "main language" column also hides a lot. India's Constitution lists 22 languages in its Eighth Schedule, from Assamese to Urdu, and many more are spoken across the region. You'll meet them in [Chapter 6](#). And two of the eight, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, are island countries.

Some lists differ a little. Afghanistan is sometimes grouped with Central Asia instead, and Myanmar or Tibet are occasionally included. This book follows the SAARC list of eight, which is the most widely used.

Whose Story?

Even the name of the region depends on who is talking. "The Indian subcontinent" became common in the British Empire in the early 1900s and is still widely used in Britain and in India, where many writers like it because it points to the culture the region shares. Many people in Pakistan and Bangladesh, which became separate countries in 1947 and 1971, find the phrase uncomfortable because it puts India's name on everyone, and they usually say "South Asia," as historians increasingly do. Afghans may describe their country as part of Central Asia, South Asia or both. Even international bodies differ: since mid-2025 the World Bank groups Afghanistan and Pakistan with the Middle East and North Africa in its regional statistics, though both remain SAARC members.

1.4 How Many People Live in South Asia?

The **Population of South Asia** is the total number of people living in its eight countries. Add up the 2025 World Bank numbers from the table and you get about **1.99 billion people** (2025, World Bank). The whole world had about 8.2 billion people that year, so South Asia was home to roughly **one in four people on Earth**.

In 2025 India was the most populous country in the world, ahead of China, and Pakistan and Bangladesh were both among the ten most populous countries on Earth (World Bank).

Here's how the total breaks down.

Country	Share of South Asia's 2025 population (approximate)
India	about 73.5%
Pakistan	about 12.8%
Bangladesh	about 8.8%
Afghanistan	about 2.2%
Nepal	about 1.5%
Sri Lanka	about 1.1%
Bhutan	about 0.04%
Maldives	about 0.03%

Watch out for this number trap



If you look up "South Asia population" on the World Bank website, you'll get a smaller number than 1.99 billion. That's because the World Bank's own "South Asia" group now leaves out Afghanistan and Pakistan, so always check which countries a total includes.

Why do so many people live here? Part of the answer is history: farming villages and cities have existed in the region for thousands of years (that's [Chapter 2](#)). But a big part of the answer is the land and water you're about to meet. Rich river soil, warm weather and a dependable rainy season make it possible to grow a lot of food, and food supports large populations.

1.5 The Mountain Walls: Himalaya and Hindu Kush

Look at any physical map of Asia and you'll see South Asia's northern edge drawn in dark brown. That's a wall of the highest mountains on Earth.

The Himalaya

The **Himalaya** (हिमालय, *hi-MAA-lay*, "abode of snow") is the mountain range that separates the plains of the subcontinent from the high Tibetan Plateau to the north. The name comes from Sanskrit: *hima* means frost or snow, and *ālaya* means dwelling or home. You'll also see it written "the Himalayas," with an s. Both are correct.

Some key facts:

- The range curves in an arc about 2,400 km (1,500 miles) long, running from west-northwest to east-southeast.

- It holds more than 100 peaks taller than 7,200 m (23,600 ft), including the highest mountain on Earth.
- That mountain is Mount Everest, 8,848.86 m (29,031.7 ft) tall, according to a joint measurement by China and Nepal in 2020. Its summit sits on the border between Nepal and China. In Nepali it is called Sagarmatha.
- The Himalaya spans five countries: Nepal, India, China, Bhutan and Pakistan. So it is not "in" any single country.

How did mountains this tall form? Through a very slow crash. About 80 million years ago, the land that is now the subcontinent was a separate piece of Earth's crust (a tectonic plate) sitting roughly 6,400 km south of Asia. It drifted north. Somewhere between 40 and 50 million years ago, it ran into the Eurasian plate. The crust crumpled and piled upward, and according to the US Geological Survey, the Himalaya is still rising by more than 1 cm a year. That's why it makes sense to think of the subcontinent as a distinct piece of Asia. It really did arrive as its own piece of land.

The mountains matter for people in two big ways. They block the cold air of Central Asia from blowing south, and their snow and glaciers feed the region's largest rivers. Many Himalayan peaks are also sacred in Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

A disputed area



The western end of the Himalaya runs through Kashmir, a region whose control is disputed among India, Pakistan and China, and each country has its own position on where its borders lie. That's one reason the maps in this book are schematic and never draw official borders.

The Hindu Kush

West of the Himalaya, another range takes over. The **Hindu Kush** is a mountain range about 800 km (500 miles) long that stretches from central and eastern Afghanistan into northwestern Pakistan, with a small piece in far southeastern Tajikistan. Its highest peak is Tirich Mir, 7,708 m (25,289 ft), in the Chitral District of Pakistan. It is the highest mountain anywhere outside the Himalaya and Karakoram ranges.

The Hindu Kush has been both a wall and a doorway, with routes that carried traders, travelers and armies between Central Asia and South Asia. Buddhism was once widespread in its valleys, and the giant Buddha statues carved into the cliffs at Bamiyan, in Afghanistan, stood until they were destroyed in 2001. Today most people in the region are Muslim.

1.6 Three Great Rivers

Mountains collect snow, the snow melts into rivers, and the rivers carry soil down to the plains. That chain is the reason so many people live in South Asia. Three rivers matter most.

The Indus

The **Indus River** is about 3,180 km (1,980 miles) long. It begins on the Tibetan Plateau in China, flows northwest through the disputed Kashmir region (first through Indian-administered Ladakh, then Pakistani-administered Gilgit-Baltistan), then turns south and runs the full length of Pakistan before emptying into the Arabian Sea near Karachi. Along the way it collects five big tributaries in the Punjab: the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej. The name *Punjab* means "land of five rivers."

Most of Pakistan's farming depends on the Indus. It's also the river that gave the whole subcontinent its outside name. Its old Sanskrit name is Sindhu, and through Old Persian and Greek that name became the English words "Indus"

and "India," as well as "Hindustan," "land of the Indus." And it was along the Indus and its neighbors that one of the world's earliest city civilizations grew, a story for Chapter 2.

The Ganges (Ganga)

The **Ganges (Ganga) River** is about 2,525 km (1,569 miles) long. In India it is called the Ganga (गंगा, *GUNG-gaa*), and in Bangladesh it is called the Padma. It rises in the western Himalaya in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, flows east across the northern plains of India, picks up major tributaries such as the Yamuna and several rivers coming down from Nepal, then crosses into Bangladesh.

Hundreds of millions of people depend on the Ganga, and many big cities stand on it or its connected rivers, including Varanasi, Patna, Kolkata and Dhaka. In Hinduism the Ganga is worshipped as a goddess, and many Hindus bathe in it as an act of devotion. You'll learn more in [Chapter 5](#).

The Brahmaputra

The **Brahmaputra River** is about 3,000 km (1,900 miles) long. It begins in Tibet near Mount Kailash, where it's called the Yarlung Tsangpo, and flows east along the north side of the Himalaya. Then it turns and cuts south through the mountains in deep gorges, enters India in the state of Arunachal Pradesh, flows west through the Assam Valley, and turns south into Bangladesh, where it is called the Jamuna. It is a braided river, which means it splits into many shifting channels, and it floods often, especially when Himalayan snow melts.

Where the rivers meet

In Bangladesh, the Padma (Ganga) and the Jamuna (Brahmaputra) join, then merge with the Meghna River and pour into the Bay of Bengal. Together

they built the Ganges Delta, also called the Bengal Delta, which is the largest river delta in the world. It covers most of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. At its edge on the sea is the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, shared by Bangladesh and India. The Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna system carries so much water that only two river systems on Earth, the Amazon and the Congo, pour more fresh water into the sea.

That's the land Zara's family comes from: wet, green, flat, crossed by rivers, and shaped by them.

River	Approx. length	Starts in	Flows through	Ends in	Other names
Indus	3,180 km	Tibet (China)	Kashmir region, Pakistan	Arabian Sea	See also: Zaskar, Tista
Ganges (Ganga)	2,525 km	Uttarakhand, India	India, Bangladesh	Bay of Bengal	See also: Padma, Bhagirathi
Brahmaputra	3,000 km	Tibet (China)	China, India, Bangladesh	Bay of Bengal (through the delta)	See also: Yarlung Tsangpo, Jamuna

1.7 Plains, Plateau, Ghats and Desert

Between the mountains and the sea, the land changes a lot. Four landforms explain most of the map.

The Indo-Gangetic Plain

The **Indo-Gangetic Plain** is the huge, flat, fertile lowland that stretches across the north of the subcontinent, from Pakistan in the west, through northern India and southern Nepal, to almost all of Bangladesh in the east. It covers about 700,000 square km (270,000 square miles). It's named for the two river systems that drain it, the Indus and the Ganga.

The rivers built the plain themselves. Flood after flood, they spread fine mud called **alluvium**, so the plain is one of the largest unbroken stretches of river soil anywhere. It's among the most densely populated and most intensely farmed places on Earth, home to many of the region's biggest cities: Lahore, Delhi, Lucknow, Patna, Kolkata and Dhaka all sit on or near it.

The Deccan Plateau

South of the plain, the land rises. The **Deccan Plateau** is a large raised tableland that covers much of central and southern India, about 422,000 square km. Its average height is about 600 m (2,000 ft). The name Deccan comes from the Sanskrit word दक्षिण (*DUK-shin*), "south."

The plateau tilts gently from west to east, so most of its big rivers, such as the Godavari, the Krishna and the Kaveri, flow east and empty into the Bay of Bengal. The northwest part of the plateau is made of thick layers of dark volcanic rock called the Deccan Traps, laid down by enormous lava flows about 66 million years ago. Much of the land there has dark black soil. Because mountains on its western edge block rain, much of the Deccan is drier than the coasts, with a semi-arid climate.

The Western and Eastern Ghats

The **Western and Eastern Ghats** are the two mountain ranges that frame the Deccan Plateau, one along each coast of peninsular India. *Ghat* comes from

the Hindi word घाट (*GHAAT*), which means a flight of steps leading down to a river, or a mountain pass. These ranges are like giant steps from the plateau down to the sea.

- The **Western Ghats** run about 1,600 km along India's west coast, from the state of Gujarat south through Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Kerala to Tamil Nadu. They form an almost continuous wall, with peaks over 2,000 m. The highest is Anamudi, 2,695 m. They catch the rain-bearing monsoon winds coming off the Arabian Sea, so their western slopes and the coast below them get very heavy rain, while the land behind them stays drier. The Western Ghats are also famous for their forests and wildlife.
- The **Eastern Ghats** run about 1,750 km along the east coast, from Odisha through Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to Tamil Nadu. Unlike the Western Ghats, they are broken into separate hills, with many gaps where rivers cut through to the Bay of Bengal. They are lower, about 600 m on average, so they affect the weather less.

The two ranges meet in the Nilgiri Hills in the far south.

The Thar Desert

In the northwest, where India meets Pakistan, the land turns to sand. The **Thar Desert**, also called the Great Indian Desert, is a dry region of sandy plains and low hills. About 85 percent of it lies in India, mostly in the state of Rajasthan, and the rest lies in Pakistan's Sindh and Punjab provinces. It gets most of its little rain from the summer monsoon, usually less than 500 mm (20 inches) a year. Summers are extremely hot and winters are cooler.

The Thar is a good reminder that South Asia isn't one climate. People have lived in the Thar for a very long time, getting by with herding and careful water storage, and the desert has its own traditions of music and craft that you'll meet in later chapters.

A quick way to remember the layout: walk south from Tibet and you step down from the Himalaya to the Indo-Gangetic Plain, up onto the Deccan Plateau, then down the Ghats to the coast, with desert to the northwest and delta to the northeast.

1.8 The Monsoon

Ask South Asian grandparents about the weather back home, and there's a good chance the first word they say is "monsoon." It's the most important weather pattern in the region.

What the word means

The English word monsoon comes from the Arabic word موسم (*MAW-sim*), *mawsim*, which means "season." Sailors crossing the Arabian Sea between Africa, Arabia and India learned long ago that the winds blew from the northeast for half the year and from the southwest for the rest, and they used that pattern for their voyages. Ocean trade depended on it, as you'll see in [Chapter 3](#).

So a **monsoon** is, first of all, a wind that reverses direction with the seasons. The India Meteorological Department (IMD) describes it as winds along the Indian Ocean coasts that blow from the southwest for about half the year and from the northeast for the other half. In everyday speech, though, "the monsoon" usually means the rainy season that the southwest winds bring in summer. In Bangla, Zara's Nanu calls that season বর্ষা (*BOR-sha*), *borsha*, which means both "rain" and "the rainy season."

How the summer monsoon works

You can feel the basic idea at a beach. On a hot day the sand gets hot fast, but the water stays cooler, because land heats up faster than water.

1. In spring and early summer, the huge landmass of South Asia and the rest of Asia heats up much faster than the Indian Ocean.
2. Hot air over the land rises, which lowers the air pressure there.
3. Cooler, moist air from over the ocean flows in toward the land to fill the gap. In South Asia that wind blows from the southwest.
4. As the moist air is pushed up over hills and mountains, such as the Western Ghats and later the Himalaya, it cools, and its water falls as rain.
5. In winter the pattern flips. The land cools faster than the sea, and cool, dry winds blow outward from the land, from the northeast.

The Himalaya matters here too. It acts like a wall that stops the monsoon clouds from simply drifting away north, so they drop their rain on the plains and foothills.

When it arrives

The southwest monsoon arrives on a fairly regular schedule. According to the IMD, it normally reaches the state of Kerala, at India's southwest tip, around **1 June**, then moves north in surges and covers the whole of India around **8 July**. Rain moves up the west coast from the Arabian Sea, while low-pressure systems that form over the Bay of Bengal carry heavy rain westward across the land. The monsoon begins to pull back from northwest India in September and has usually withdrawn from the country by October. Those are average dates, though. In any real year the monsoon can come early or late, and people watch the forecasts closely.

The amount of rain changes a lot from place to place. Mawsynram and Cherrapunji, two towns in the hills of the Indian state of Meghalaya, just north of Bangladesh, trade places as the wettest spots on Earth. Meanwhile, the

Thar Desert gets only a little. And Afghanistan sits mostly outside the monsoon zone altogether; most of its rain and snow falls in winter and spring.

Not all monsoon rain comes in summer, either. In the southeast of India, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh get rain from the northeast monsoon during the winter months, after the summer monsoon has left, when winds crossing the Bay of Bengal pick up moisture on the way.

It doesn't rain all day



"Monsoon season" doesn't mean nonstop rain. The monsoon comes in active spells of heavy rain and "break" spells of days with little rain, and many monsoon days mix sun, sticky heat and a big afternoon downpour.

Why it matters so much

The southwest monsoon brings most of the year's rain to most of India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Many farms in the region don't have large irrigation systems, so they depend on the monsoon to water their crops, especially rice, and to refill wells and underground water for the rest of the year. A late or weak monsoon can hurt harvests and the whole economy. A very strong one can cause floods and landslides. The monsoon also feeds the rivers that power hydroelectric dams.

The monsoon shows up in songs, poems, foods and festivals too, and in a lot of family memories of the first rain of the season.

1.9 Water All Around: The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean

South Asia's southern half is a peninsula, which means water on three sides. Two big bodies of water shape the coasts.

The **Bay of Bengal** is the northeastern part of the Indian Ocean, lying east of India and south of Bangladesh, with Myanmar on its eastern side and Sri Lanka at its southwestern edge. It covers about 2.2 million square km (about 840,000 square miles). Many of the subcontinent's biggest rivers flow into it, including the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, the Godavari, the Krishna and the Kaveri.

The bay's coasts include the Sundarbans mangrove forest and some of the longest natural beaches in the world, such as Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh and Marina Beach in Chennai, India. Severe cyclones also form over the bay, which is one reason coastal Bangladesh and eastern India plan so carefully for storms. Chattogram, where Zara's parents grew up, is Bangladesh's busiest port, right on the bay.

The **Indian Ocean** is the third-largest of the world's five oceans, covering about 70.6 million square km, or about 20% of the water on Earth's surface. It has Asia to the north, Africa to the west and Australia to the east. It's also the warmest ocean, and monsoons shape the climate all around it. The Arabian Sea, to the west of India and south of Pakistan, and the Bay of Bengal are both arms of it.

Two of South Asia's countries sit out in this ocean:

- **Sri Lanka** is a large island just south of India's tip, mostly flat to rolling coastal plains with mountains rising in the south-central part.
- **The Maldives** is a chain of 1,192 small coral islands grouped into 26 atolls (rings of coral reef around a lagoon), stretched across the equator southwest of India and Sri Lanka. More than 80% of its islands sit less than 1 m above sea level, which makes the Maldives the lowest-lying country in the world and very vulnerable to rising seas.

For thousands of years the Indian Ocean worked more like a highway than a barrier, carrying ships, goods, faiths and languages between South Asia, Arabia, East Africa and Southeast Asia. Arab and Persian traders helped bring Islam to the Maldives in the 12th century.

1.10 Putting It Together: Regional Diversity

Regional Diversity is the idea that South Asia is not one place with one climate, one language, one faith or one way of life, but many different places shaped by different land, water and history. The geography you've just read about is one of the biggest reasons for that diversity.

Here's how different everyday life can be, depending on where you stand:

Place	Country	Landscape	What shapes daily life
Kabul	Afghanistan	High valley ringed by mountains	Most rain and snow from December to April; dry summers; little monsoon rain
Lahore	Pakistan	Indo-Gangetic Plain, Punjab	Hot summers, monsoon rain from June to September, farming on river-fed land
Kathmandu	Nepal	Valley in the Himalayan foothills	Summer monsoon rains, mountains all around

Place	Country	Landscape	What shapes daily life
Chattogram	Bangladesh	Coast of the Bay of Bengal, near the delta	Heavy monsoon rain, rivers and floods, port life, cyclone risk
Jaisalmer	India	Thar Desert	Little rain, extremely hot summers, careful water use
Kandy	Sri Lanka	Central highlands	Cooler than the coast, green and rainy
Malé	Maldives	Low coral island	Ocean on every side; fishing and tourism; sea-level rise

Each of those places has its own foods, clothes, building styles and festivals, and the land is one big reason why. In the chapters ahead, every time you meet a tradition, try asking: what about the land and weather made this make sense?

Geography isn't the only reason. History, trade, migration, faith and language add their own layers, as the rest of this book shows.

Back in Ms. Okafor's classroom, Zara and Ben finally finish the slide. At the top, in big letters: **"South Asia = a region of 8 countries, about 2 billion people."** Below that, a simple tile map with the Himalaya across the top, three rivers running down, and the monsoon arrow coming up from the southwest. At the bottom, Zara adds one line: "Bangladesh is not part of India. Both are part of

South Asia." Ben reads it and grins. "Okay," he says. "Now I get why your Nanu talks about the rain so much."

Diagram: Region Explorer

Region Explorer: South Asia

Click a country to learn about it. Press Start to watch the monsoon arrive.

Monsoon: not started (press Start)

Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders.

Bangladesh

Capital: Dhaka

Population (2025): 175,686,899 (about 176 million)

Main languages: Bangla (Bengali)

Mostly low delta land where the Ganga (Padma) meets the Brahmaputra (Jamuna).

All eight countries: about 1.99 billion people (2025, World Bank)

Start monsoon

Reset

Bangladesh ▼

☒ Show mountains, rivers and seas

[Back to Region Explorer Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch01-region-explorer/main.html>

Open the Region Explorer fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Region Explorer

sim-id: ch01-region-explorer

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: explain

Learning Objective: The learner will locate the eight countries of South Asia on a schematic map and explain how the mountains and the southwest monsoon shape where rain falls and where people live.

Canvas: responsive width; 620 px drawing area plus 80 px control area.

Controls: Start monsoon / Pause button, Reset button, country menu, "Show mountains, rivers and seas" checkbox; click or tap any country tile.

Behavior: Eight country tiles sit roughly in their geographic positions (no borders). Selecting a tile shows its capital, 2025 population (World Bank) and main languages. The monsoon starts paused; Start animates a shaded rain zone spreading from the southwest sea (late May) to all of India (about 8 July, IMD normal date), with a Bay of Bengal branch. Most of Afghanistan and the far north stay dry. The caption "Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders." is drawn inside the drawing area.

Start by clicking each of the eight tiles and reading the panel. Which country has the most people? Which have the fewest? Then untick the checkbox to hide the labels and see if you can still name the Himalaya, the Hindu Kush, the two Ghats and the three rivers.

Next, press **Start monsoon** and watch carefully. Pause when the date banner says the monsoon reaches Kerala, and again when the rain covers Bangladesh. Notice where the rain shows up first (the sea near Sri Lanka and India's southwest coast), how the rain reaches Bangladesh from the Bay of Bengal side, and which country stays almost completely dry. Then compare

the rainy areas with the places you know are crowded, like the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the delta. The map is simplified, so the exact edges aren't precise, but the pattern is real.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about where your family comes from: the village, town or city, the river or region nearby, what the land and weather were like, and what the monsoon meant to them. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Bring a printed or phone map of South Asia and ask them to point to the place they grew up. Ask if it's okay to take notes.

Questions to ask

1. Where did you grow up? What was the nearest river, mountain, desert or sea?
2. What did the place look like out your window or on your walk to school?
3. What was the weather like through the year? Which season did you like most, and why?
4. When the first monsoon rain came (or the first big rain of the year), what did people do? Was there a smell, a food, a song or a game you remember?
5. How has that place changed since you were young, or since you moved away? Do you know what the weather is like there now?

6. If I visit one day, what is the one thing about the land or the weather there that you'd want me to see or feel?

Listen for: names of rivers or mountains (is it near the Indus River, the Ganges (Ganga) River or the Brahmaputra River, or the Himalaya?), stories about the Monsoon, and details that show Regional Diversity, such as how different their home was from another relative's.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

? Your turn: compare two answers ✓

Compare your elder's description of the weather back home with what this chapter says about the monsoon in that part of South Asia. Did the monsoon arrive when the IMD's normal dates say it should? If a friend interviewed someone from a different country or region, list two ways the landscapes and seasons they describe were different.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: South Asia is just another name for India.

Reality: South Asia is a region of eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. India is the largest by far, but Bangladesh, Pakistan and the others are separate, independent countries with their own governments, languages and histories.

Myth: The Himalaya is in Nepal (or in India).

Reality: The Himalaya stretches about 2,400 km across five countries:

Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China. Mount Everest itself sits on the Nepal-China border.

Myth: Monsoon means it rains all day, every day for months.

Reality: A monsoon is a seasonal shift in wind direction. The summer monsoon brings a rainy season, but rain comes in active spells and break spells, and many monsoon days include sun and heat between heavy showers.

Myth: All of South Asia is hot all the time.

Reality: The region includes snowy Himalayan peaks, cold, dry high valleys on the northern side of the western Himalaya, and Sri Lanka's central highlands, where frost can occur on some winter nights, as well as hot plains, deserts and tropical coasts. Climate depends a lot on height and distance from the sea.

Myth: The "Indian subcontinent" and "India" mean the same thing.

Reality: "Indian subcontinent" is a geographic term for the landmass south of the Himalaya, which today includes several countries. "India" is the name of one modern country since 1947. That's why many people prefer the term "South Asia" for the region.

Check Yourself

? 1. Name the eight countries of South Asia. ✓

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. They are the eight members of SAARC.

? 2. What is the difference between a region and a country? ✓

A country has its own government, borders and laws. A region is a group of places people talk about together because of geography, history or culture; it has no government of its own.

? 3. About how many people lived in South Asia in 2025, and what share of the world is that? ✓

About 1.99 billion people (2025, World Bank), roughly one in four people on Earth.

? 4. Which two rivers join in Bangladesh to form the world's largest delta, and what are they called there? ✓

The Ganga (called the Padma in Bangladesh) and the Brahmaputra (called the Jamuna). They join and flow with the Meghna into the Bay of Bengal.

? 5. Why does the summer monsoon blow from the southwest? ✓

In early summer the land heats up faster than the Indian Ocean. Hot air rises over the land, and cooler, moist air from the ocean to the southwest flows in to replace it, bringing rain.

Exercises

Remember

1. List the capitals of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan.

 Answer

Bangladesh: Dhaka. Bhutan: Thimphu. Nepal: Kathmandu. Pakistan: Islamabad.

2. In what city and year was SAARC founded, and which country joined later?

 Answer

SAARC was founded in Dhaka on 8 December 1985 by seven countries. Afghanistan joined as the eighth member in 2007.

Understand

1. Explain in your own words why the land south of the Himalaya can be called a "subcontinent."

 Answer

The land that is now the subcontinent sits on its own tectonic plate. It drifted north for millions of years and collided with Asia between about 40 and 50 million years ago, pushing up the Himalaya. It is a distinct piece of the Asian continent.

2. Explain why the Deccan Plateau is drier than the coast of Kerala, even though both are in southern India.

Answer

The Western Ghats stand between the Arabian Sea and the plateau. Monsoon winds rise over the Ghats and drop much of their rain on the western slopes and the coast, so the plateau behind them gets less.

Apply

1. Use the Region Explorer. Pause the monsoon on 15 June. Which countries are getting rain on that date, and which are not? Write two sentences explaining the pattern. *Hint: think about where the monsoon starts and which way it moves.*
2. A family member says they grew up "near the Jamuna, in the north of the country." Using this chapter, figure out which country and which big river they mean, and where that river starts. *Hint: rivers can have different names in different countries.*

Analyze

1. Compare the Indo-Gangetic Plain and the Thar Desert. Using at least three facts from the chapter, explain why one supports so many more people than the other. *Hint: think about water, soil and rain.*
2. The World Bank's "South Asia" total is smaller than the eight-country total in this chapter. Analyze why the two numbers differ and why it matters to check the definition behind any statistic. *Hint: which countries are in each group?*

Evaluate

1. Some people prefer "South Asia" and others prefer "the Indian subcontinent." Which term would you use on your club's slide, and why? Consider who will be in the room. *Hint: the Whose Story? box gives several points of view.*
2. Your friend says, "The monsoon is just bad weather." Evaluate this claim using evidence about farming, water supply, floods and culture from the chapter. *Hint: a fair answer looks at both benefits and dangers.*

Create

1. Design your own one-slide answer to "What counts as South Asia?" for a club meeting. Include a schematic map (no official borders), the eight countries, one population fact with its year and source, and one fact about land or weather. *Hint: keep it to what fits on a single slide.*
2. Write a short postcard (100 to 150 words) from someone living in one of the places in the Regional Diversity table in 1.10, describing their weather and landscape during the monsoon season. *Hint: use at least two concept words from this chapter.*

Key Takeaways

- South Asia is a region of eight countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the members of SAARC.
- "Indian Subcontinent" describes the landmass south of the Himalaya; "South Asia" describes the group of countries. Many people prefer "South Asia" because it doesn't center one country.

- About 1.99 billion people lived in South Asia in 2025 (World Bank), roughly one in four people on Earth.
- The Himalaya and Hindu Kush form the region's northern mountain walls. The Himalaya spans five countries and was pushed up when the subcontinent's plate collided with Asia.
- The Indus, the Ganges (Ganga) and the Brahmaputra carry snowmelt and soil to the plains; the Ganga and Brahmaputra build the world's largest delta in Bangladesh and India.
- The southwest monsoon normally reaches Kerala around 1 June and covers India by about 8 July, bringing most of the year's rain to much of the region, but not to most of Afghanistan.
- Mountains, plains, plateau, desert, delta and islands help explain South Asia's regional diversity in food, dress, buildings and ways of life.

You've got the map!



You can now find all eight countries and explain why rivers and rain matter so much here. Next, in Chapter 2, we travel back thousands of years to the cities that grew up along the Indus.

Quiz: What Is South Asia?

Test your understanding of Chapter 1. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

Which list contains only countries that are part of South Asia as defined by SAARC?

- A. India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka
- B. Afghanistan, Bhutan, Maldives, Pakistan
- C. Bangladesh, Tibet, Bhutan, India
- D. Pakistan, Iran, Nepal, Sri Lanka

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Maldives and Pakistan are all among SAARC's eight members. Myanmar and Tibet are sometimes mentioned as border zones, but they are not SAARC members, and Iran is not part of South Asia.

Concept Tested: SAARC **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

About how many people lived in the eight countries of South Asia in 2025, according to the World Bank?

- A. About 500 million
- B. About 1.46 billion
- C. About 8.2 billion
- D. About 1.99 billion

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. The eight countries together had about 1.99 billion people in 2025, roughly one in four people on Earth. About 1.46 billion is India's population alone (a common mix-up), and 8.2 billion is the whole world.

Concept Tested: Population of South Asia **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

Which body of water receives the combined flow of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra?

- A. The Bay of Bengal
- B. The Arabian Sea
- C. The Red Sea
- D. The Caspian Sea

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. The Ganga (Padma) and the Brahmaputra (Jamuna) join in Bangladesh, flow with the Meghna, and empty into the Bay of Bengal through the world's largest delta. The Arabian Sea is where the Indus ends, on the other side of the subcontinent.

Concept Tested: Bay of Bengal **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

What is the best explanation of the difference between "South Asia" and the "Indian subcontinent"?

- A. They are two names for the country of India.
- B. South Asia is only the island countries, while the subcontinent is the mainland.
- C. South Asia is a group of eight countries; the subcontinent is a physical landmass south of the Himalaya.
- D. The subcontinent includes Afghanistan, but South Asia does not.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. "South Asia" names a region made up of eight countries, while "Indian subcontinent" is a geographic term for the landmass on its own tectonic plate. Option D has it backward: Afghanistan is usually counted in South Asia but not in the subcontinent.

Concept Tested: Indian Subcontinent **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Why does the summer monsoon blow from the southwest toward South Asia?

- A. The Himalaya pushes air south in summer.
- B. The land heats up faster than the Indian Ocean, so moist ocean air flows in toward the warm land.
- C. The ocean is hotter than the land in summer, so air flows out to sea.

D. Winds from Central Asia carry rain over the mountains.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. In early summer the land warms faster than the ocean, air rises over the land, and cooler, moist air from the Indian Ocean flows in from the southwest, bringing rain. Option C reverses the pattern, which is closer to what happens in winter.

Concept Tested: Monsoon **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Why is the Indo-Gangetic Plain one of the most densely populated places on Earth?

- A. Its rivers spread fertile alluvium, and water from Himalayan rivers supports large-scale farming.
- B. It is the highest and coolest part of the region.
- C. It is a desert with large oil reserves.
- D. It is an island chain with many ports.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. The Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra built the plain from river soil, and their water makes intense farming possible, which supports huge populations. Option B describes the Himalaya, not the plain.

Concept Tested: Indo-Gangetic Plain **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Ayesha's family is from Lahore, Pakistan, and Nima's family is from Solukhumbu, Nepal. Ben says, "So they both live near the Himalaya, which is in Nepal." Which response best corrects Ben?

- A. "The Himalaya is only in India."
- B. "Lahore is on the Deccan Plateau, far from any mountains."
- C. "Nepal has no mountains; they're all in Pakistan."
- D. "The Himalaya stretches across five countries, including Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China, so it isn't in just one country."

Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. The Himalaya spans Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan and China, about 2,400 km in all. Option B is wrong because Lahore is on the Indo-Gangetic Plain in Punjab, and the Deccan Plateau is in central and southern India.

Concept Tested: Himalaya **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

Zara's cousin in Dhaka is planning a June trip to visit family in India and asks Zara when the rains start there. Using the chapter, where does the southwest monsoon normally arrive on mainland India first, and around what date?

- A. Delhi, around 1 May
- B. Kerala, around 1 June
- C. Kabul, around 1 July
- D. The Thar Desert, around 15 June

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. The India Meteorological Department's normal onset date over Kerala, at India's southwest tip, is around 1 June. The monsoon then covers all of India around 8 July. Kabul is wrong because Afghanistan lies mostly outside the monsoon zone.

Concept Tested: Monsoon **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

The Deccan Plateau is drier than the Kerala coast, even though both are in southern India. What is the best explanation?

- A. The Deccan is closer to the Thar Desert.
- B. The Eastern Ghats block all rain from the Bay of Bengal.
- C. The Western Ghats catch the monsoon winds from the Arabian Sea, so much of the rain falls on the coast side before the air reaches the plateau.
- D. The Deccan is at sea level, and rain only falls on mountains.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Monsoon winds rise over the Western Ghats and drop much of their rain on the western slopes and coast, leaving the plateau behind them drier. Option B can look right, but the Eastern Ghats are low and broken, so they affect the weather much less.

Concept Tested: Western and Eastern Ghats **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

A club member finds a website that lists South Asia's population as about 1.69 billion for 2025, not 1.99 billion. What is the most likely reason for the difference?

- A. The website is counting a different set of countries; the World Bank's own "South Asia" group now leaves out Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- B. The population of South Asia fell by 300 million people in one year.
- C. The website forgot to count India.
- D. The smaller number counts only people who speak Hindi.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Since mid-2025 the World Bank groups Afghanistan and Pakistan with the Middle East and North Africa, so its "South Asia" total covers only six countries. Leaving out India (option C) would make the number far smaller, about 0.5 billion.

Concept Tested: Population of South Asia **Bloom's Level:** Analyze