

Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia

Summary

South Asia is home to many of the world's faiths. Four of them, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, began in the region, and others, including Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism, arrived long ago and put down deep roots. This chapter introduces each faith through the same five lenses: where it came from, its sacred texts, its place of worship, a major festival, and a core idea. It also looks at pilgrimage, at the places and practices that different faiths share, and at religious pluralism, the fact of many faiths living side by side, with all its friendships and tensions. The goal is understanding, not ranking: you'll learn how followers describe their own beliefs, in their own words where possible.

Concepts Covered

1. Hinduism
2. Dharma
3. Karma and Rebirth
4. Puja
5. Buddhism
6. Theravada and Vajrayana
7. Jainism
8. Ahimsa

9. Islam in South Asia
10. Sunni and Shia Islam
11. Sikhism
12. Guru Granth Sahib
13. Langar
14. Christianity in South Asia
15. Zoroastrians (Parsis)
16. Jewish Communities
17. Pilgrimage
18. Religious Pluralism

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?**, for the eight countries and the rivers.
- **Chapter 2: Ancient Roots**, for the Vedic period and the early history of Buddhism and Jainism.
- **Chapter 3: Empires and Encounters**, especially early Islam in South Asia, the Bhakti movement, Sufism and Guru Nanak.

Many ways of believing



Hi, it's Mora! You probably have classmates who fast in Ramadan, light diyas at Diwali, wear a turban or kara, go to Mass, or don't follow any religion at all. Knowing a little about each other's faiths helps you ask kind questions, avoid hurtful mix-ups, and maybe get invited to a great festival meal. Every tradition has a story. Let's find it!

5.1 Shoes Off, Three Times

On a Saturday in October, the Prairie Ridge South Asian Student Association goes on a field trip. Ms. Okafor has arranged three visits in the Twin Cities: a mosque in the morning, a gurdwara at lunchtime, and a mandir (a Hindu temple) in the afternoon. Zara Hossain's family prays at the mosque. Simran Kaur Gill's family goes to the gurdwara every Sunday. Arjun Reddy's grandmother volunteers at the mandir.

At the mosque, Zara shows Ben Lindqvist the shelves by the door, and everyone leaves their shoes there before entering the prayer hall. At the gurdwara, Simran hands Ben an orange scarf to cover his head, and again, shoes come off. Then they all sit in rows on the floor and eat dal, roti and kheer for free, side by side with strangers. At the mandir, Arjun points to a long rack of sneakers and sandals. Ben laughs. "Okay, three buildings, three religions, and I've taken my shoes off three times. So are these faiths basically the same, or totally different?"

Simran shakes her head. "Not the same. But you can't understand any of them from the outside in five minutes." On the bus home, Ben keeps asking questions. How do you learn about many faiths without mixing them up, and without deciding one is better than another?

5.2 Five Lenses, No Ranking

Ben already knows one faith from the inside. His family is Lutheran, a kind of Christian. If a friend asked him about it, he could answer a few basic questions: Where did it start? What book do you read? Where do you go to worship? What's your biggest holiday? What's one idea that matters most? Those answers wouldn't be the whole of his faith, but they'd be a fair start.

This chapter uses those same five questions, or **lenses**, for every faith:

1. **Origins:** where and when it began, and who followers say founded or taught it.
2. **Sacred texts:** the writings it treasures.
3. **Place of worship:** the building where people gather.
4. **A major festival:** one celebration among many.
5. **A core idea:** one teaching that followers often describe as central.

Using the same lenses for every faith keeps the comparison fair. It also comes with three ground rules that this whole book follows:

- **Describe, don't judge.** We say "many Hindus believe" or "in Sikh tradition," because these are the beliefs of followers, not claims the book is making.
- **No ranking.** Older doesn't mean better, and bigger doesn't mean more important.
- **Practice varies.** Inside every faith there are many communities, schools and family customs. When you read "Muslims do X," remember that real families are more varied than any summary.

Ask before assuming



A person's name, clothes or country don't tell you their faith, or how they practice it. If you're curious, ask politely, and accept "I'd rather not say" as a full answer.

5.3 A Faith Map of South Asia

Before meeting each faith, it helps to see where people of different faiths live. The table shows the largest groups in each of the eight countries, using each country's most recent census (or the best available estimate).

Country	Largest faith	Other important communities	Source and year
Afghanistan	Islam (almost everyone; mostly Sunni)	A Shia minority; very small Sikh and Hindu communities	Estimates; no recent census
Bangladesh	Islam, 91.08%	Hindus 7.96%; Buddhists 0.61%; Christians 0.30%	2022 census (final report, 2023)
Bhutan	Buddhism, about three-quarters	Hindus, most of the rest	Pew Research estimate
India	Hinduism, 79.8%	Muslims 14.2%; Christians 2.3%; Sikhs just under 2%; Buddhists and Jains each under 1%	2011 census
Maldives	Islam	The constitution requires citizens to be Muslim	2008 constitution
Nepal	Hinduism, 81.19%	Buddhists 8.21%; Muslims 5.09%; Kirat (the faith of Kirati peoples such as the Rai and Limbu) 3.17%; Christians 1.76%	2021 census

Country	Largest faith	Other important communities	Source and year
Pakistan	Islam, 96.35%	Hindus about 3.9 million, plus about 1.3 million in a separate Scheduled Castes category, many of them Hindu Dalit communities; Christians about 3.3 million	2023 census
Sri Lanka	Buddhism, 69.8%	Hindus 12.6%; Muslims 10.7%; Christians about 6.9%	2024 census

A few things jump out. India's figures come from the 2011 census, so treat them as a snapshot from fifteen years ago. India's next census counts its population in February 2027. Even small percentages can mean huge numbers of people: India's 14.2% Muslim share in 2011 was about 172 million people, one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. And no country lines up with only one faith. Every country on the list is home to several.

5.4 Hinduism

Origins and variety

Hinduism is a family of related traditions, beliefs and practices that grew in South Asia over thousands of years, with no single founder, no single holy book and no single central authority. Most Hindus live in India and Nepal, the two Hindu-majority countries of South Asia. There are also large Hindu

communities in Bangladesh, in Sri Lanka (mostly among Tamils in the north and east), in Pakistan (mostly in Sindh), in Bhutan, and around the world.

The word "Hindu" was first used by outsiders, from the name of the Indus River (Sindhu). Many Hindus also call their tradition *Sanatana Dharma*, "the eternal way." Inside that family are many traditions. Some Hindus focus their devotion on Vishnu (often as Krishna or Rama), some on Shiva, and some on the Goddess (Devi) in forms such as Durga or Kali. Many worship several deities, and many describe them as forms of one divine reality. In Pew Research Center's 2021 survey of India, 84% of Hindus either picked more than one god as feeling close to them or said they have many personal gods, and 61% said there is one God with many manifestations.

Sacred texts

Hinduism has many sacred texts, not one. The oldest are the **Vedas**, hymns in Sanskrit passed down by memory for many centuries. The **Upanishads** explore questions about the self and ultimate reality. The great epics, the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata** (which includes the **Bhagavad Gita**), are known to almost everyone through stories, TV shows and festivals. The **Puranas** and devotional poems in Tamil, Bengali, Hindi and many other languages matter too. Different communities value different texts most.

Three key ideas

Dharma (धर्म, *DHUR-muh*) is the idea of right order, duty and right conduct: the way things should be, and the way a person should act. In Hindi, *dharm* can also simply mean "religion." Many Hindus think of their own dharma as depending on their stage of life and responsibilities, such as being a student, a parent or a teacher.

Karma and Rebirth is the belief that a person's actions and intentions (karma, कर्म, *KUR-muh*, "action") have effects, in this life and in future lives,

and that the soul is reborn again and again in a cycle called *samsara*. In many Hindu traditions, the highest goal is *moksha*, release from that cycle. Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs also speak of karma and rebirth, each in their own way. In the 2021 Pew survey of India, 77% of Hindus and 77% of Muslims said they believe in karma, a sign of how widely the idea has spread across faith lines.

Puja (पूजा, *POO-jah*, "worship" or "honor") is the Hindu ritual of offering worship to a deity, often with light, flowers, water, incense or food. Puja can be a big temple ceremony with priests, or a few quiet minutes at a home shrine in the morning. Arjun's grandmother does a short puja every day at the small shrine in their kitchen.

Places and festivals

Hindus worship at a *mandir* (मंदिर, *MUN-dir*, "temple"), and many families also keep a home shrine. Big festivals include Diwali, the festival of lights; Holi, the spring festival of colors; Navaratri and Durga Puja in autumn; and harvest festivals such as Pongal. In Bangladesh, Durga Puja is the largest Hindu festival, and Dhaka's Dhakeshwari National Temple is dedicated to the goddess many say gave the city its name. In Pakistan, the Hinglaj Mata temple in Balochistan draws the country's largest Hindu pilgrimage. You'll meet the festivals in [Chapter 7](#).

5.5 Buddhism

Buddhism is the faith based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, called the Buddha ("awakened one"), who Buddhists believe found the path to freedom from suffering. He was born at Lumbini, in present-day Nepal, about 2,500 years ago (the exact dates are debated). Buddhists believe he reached enlightenment while meditating under a tree at Bodh Gaya, in

present-day India. Both Lumbini and the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

In Buddhist teaching, the Buddha described **Four Noble Truths**: life involves suffering and dissatisfaction; suffering has a cause, especially craving; suffering can end; and the **Eightfold Path** of right understanding, ethical living and meditation leads to that end. Buddhists take refuge in the "Three Jewels": the Buddha, his teaching (the Dharma), and the community of monks, nuns and followers (the Sangha).

Buddhism spread from South Asia across Asia and developed different schools. In India itself, many Buddhists today are Dalits whose families followed the reformer B. R. Ambedkar into Buddhism after his conversion at Nagpur in 1956 (you met him in [Chapter 4](#)). Two schools matter most in South Asia today.

Theravada and Vajrayana

Theravada and Vajrayana are two of the main schools of Buddhism. Theravada ("teaching of the elders") is the school of Sri Lanka, and its scriptures are the **Pali Canon**, preserved in the Pali language. Buddhism reached Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE, and the island has been a center of Theravada learning ever since. Vajrayana (the "diamond" or "thunderbolt" vehicle) developed later and became the Buddhism of Tibet, Bhutan and Himalayan Nepal. It uses Mahayana scriptures and Tibetan teachings, and is known for its rituals, chanted mantras and the close bond between students and their teachers.

	Theravada	Vajrayana
Where in South Asia	Sri Lanka; also most Buddhists in Bangladesh	Bhutan, Himalayan Nepal, Ladakh and other Himalayan areas
Scriptures	Pali Canon	Mahayana sutras and Tibetan Buddhist texts
Typical place	A vihara (monastery temple) with a stupa	A monastery; in Bhutan, many sit inside dzongs (fortress-like centers)
Example	Dilan Perera's family in Kandy visits the Temple of the Tooth Relic	Nima Sherpa's family follows the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism

The big Buddhist festival in Sri Lanka is Vesak (Sinhala වෙසක්, *VEH-suk*), held on the full moon of the month of Vesak, usually in May. In Theravada tradition it marks the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing. Streets and homes glow with lanterns called Vesak kudu, and volunteers set up stalls called dansalas that hand out free food and drinks to passersby. In Bangladesh, Buddhists are a small minority (0.61% in 2022), and almost all of them live in Chattogram Division, where Zara's parents grew up, especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to the east of the city.

5.6 Jainism and Ahimsa

Jainism is a faith from South Asia that teaches that every living being has a soul, and that souls can be freed from the cycle of rebirth through non-

violence, self-discipline and right knowledge. Jains believe their path has been taught by 24 *tirthankaras* ("ford-makers," teachers who help people cross the river of rebirth). The 24th, **Mahavira**, lived in what is now Bihar, India, around the 6th or 5th century BCE, close to the time of the Buddha.

Jains belong to two main groups, Digambara and Svetambara, which differ in some practices and in which collections of scripture they accept. In India, Jains live in many states, with especially large communities in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Jain temples, often carved in white marble, are famous for their detail. Jain merchant families have long been prominent in trade, and Jain families have supported temples, libraries and charities for centuries.

Ahimsa

Ahimsa (अहिंसा, *uh-HIM-sah*) means non-violence: not harming any living being, in action, word or thought. Hindus and Buddhists also value ahimsa, but Jains put it at the very center of their life. Many Jains follow a strict vegetarian diet that also leaves out root vegetables such as potatoes, onions and garlic, to avoid destroying the many tiny living things in and around them. In the 20th century, Mohandas K. Gandhi made ahimsa famous worldwide as a method of peaceful protest.

The most important Jain festival is **Paryushan**, a period of fasting, reflection and study, eight days long for Svetambara Jains. It ends with a day of asking forgiveness from everyone you may have hurt in the past year. Jains also celebrate Diwali, which in Jain tradition marks the anniversary of Mahavira's final liberation.

Same word, different weight



I notice that karma, dharma and ahimsa show up in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh traditions, but each faith gives them its own meaning and its own weight. When you hear one of these words, try asking, "What does it mean in *your* tradition?"

5.7 Islam in South Asia

Origins and basic practice

Islam began in Arabia in the early 600s CE. Muslims believe that God (Allah, the Arabic word for God) revealed the **Quran** to the Prophet Muhammad, and they also follow the **Hadith**, reports of what the Prophet said and did. Muslims around the world share the **Five Pillars** of practice: declaring faith in one God and in Muhammad as God's messenger (*shahada*), praying five times a day (*salah*, called *namaz* in South Asia), giving to those in need (*zakat*), fasting from dawn to dusk in the month of Ramadan (*sawm*), and, for those who are able, making the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*).

Islam in South Asia is the faith and culture of the region's Muslims, who today form one of the largest Muslim populations on Earth. As you read in **Chapter 3**, Islam arrived over many centuries, through Arab traders on the coasts, Sufi teachers and conquest in the northwest. Most South Asian Muslims are descended from people who lived in the region long before. Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and the Maldives are Muslim-majority countries. India had about 172 million Muslims in 2011, one of the largest Muslim populations in the world, and Sri Lanka and Nepal have significant Muslim communities too.

A Muslim place of worship is a masjid (Urdu مسجد, *MUS-jid*), or mosque. Many South Asian Muslims also visit Sufi shrines (dargahs), though some Muslims, especially in reformist movements, disapprove of some shrine practices. One of the largest in South Asia is Data Darbar in Lahore, the shrine of the 11th-century saint Ali al-Hujwiri. In the 2021 Pew survey, 37% of Muslims in North India said they identify with Sufism.

Zara's family celebrates two big festivals: **Eid al-Fitr**, which ends the month of Ramadan fasting, and **Eid al-Adha**, which comes at the time of the hajj. On Eid morning her family goes to prayer in new clothes, and her Nanu hands out money to the children.

Sunni and Shia Islam

Sunni and Shia Islam are the two main branches of Islam, which separated over a disagreement about who should lead the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632. Sunni Muslims hold that the community rightly chose the Prophet's companion Abu Bakr as the first leader (caliph). Shia Muslims hold that the Prophet named his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as his successor, and they honor a line of leaders called imams descended from Ali.

Both branches share the Quran, the Five Pillars and most beliefs, and in many South Asian towns they have lived side by side for centuries. Most South Asian Muslims are Sunni. Shia Muslims are an important minority: Pew Research Center has estimated them at about 10% to 15% of Muslims in both India and Pakistan (2009 estimate), and some scholars estimate more. During the month of Muharram, many Shia Muslims mourn the death of Imam Husain, the Prophet's grandson, at the Battle of Karbala in 680, with processions, poetry and gatherings.

5.8 Sikhism

Sikhism is a faith founded in Punjab by Guru Nanak (1469 to 1539), which teaches devotion to one God, honest work, sharing with others, and the equality of all people. You met Guru Nanak in **Chapter 3**. In Sikh tradition, nine more human Gurus followed him. The tenth, **Guru Gobind Singh**, created the **Khalsa**, the community of initiated Sikhs, on Vaisakhi in 1699. Initiated Sikhs keep five articles of faith, including uncut hair (often covered by a turban) and a steel bracelet called a kara.

Sikhs believe in one God, expressed in the phrase **Ik Onkar**, "one creator," the opening words of their scripture. Most Sikhs live in Punjab in India, where they are the majority. Some of Sikhism's holiest places, including Nankana Sahib, Guru Nanak's birthplace, and Kartarpur, where he died, are in Pakistan. In 2019 a visa-free corridor opened so pilgrims from India could cross to the gurdwara at Kartarpur. India suspended it in May 2025 amid tensions between the two countries, and as of October 2026 it remained closed to Indian pilgrims, although Pakistan says its side is open.

The Guru Granth Sahib

The **Guru Granth Sahib** is the Sikh scripture, a collection of hymns that Sikhs honor as their living Guru. The fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, compiled its first version in 1604 and placed it in the Golden Temple at Amritsar. In October 1708, shortly before he died, Guru Gobind Singh declared that after him the scripture itself would be the Guru. It has 1,430 pages, and its hymns are meant to be sung. Most are by the Sikh Gurus, but it also includes hymns by fifteen other saints (bhagats), including bhakti poets such as Kabir and Namdev and the Muslim Sufi saint Sheikh Farid.

In a gurdwara (ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ, *GUR-dwah-rah*, "door to the Guru"), the Guru Granth Sahib sits on a raised platform under a canopy. Visitors remove their shoes

and cover their heads, and they usually sit on the floor. The holiest gurdwara is the Golden Temple (Harmandir Sahib) in Amritsar, which receives about 100,000 visitors on a typical day.

Langar

Langar (ਲੰਗਰ, *LUN-gur*) is the free community kitchen of a gurdwara, where volunteers cook and serve a vegetarian meal to anyone who comes, regardless of religion, caste, gender or wealth. Everyone sits together on the floor, in rows, as equals. Sikh tradition traces langar to Guru Nanak, and it shows his teaching that all people are equal. A Sikh tradition even says that the Mughal emperor Akbar sat and ate langar with ordinary people before meeting the third Guru, Guru Amar Das.

The cooking, serving and cleaning are done as *seva* (ਸੇਵਾ, *SAY-vah*), selfless service. Simran has helped make roti for langar since she was eight, and she's the reason Ben now knows how to hold out both hands to receive it.

Visiting a place of worship



Before visiting a mosque, gurdwara, mandir, church or temple, check its website or ask a member what to wear and do. Most welcome respectful visitors, and asking first shows you care.

5.9 Christianity in South Asia

Christianity in South Asia refers to the region's many Christian communities, some among the oldest in the world, others formed later through Portuguese, Dutch, British and other missions. Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and they read the **Bible**. Their place of worship is a church, and their biggest festivals are Christmas and Easter.

- **Kerala's St. Thomas Christians** trace their church to the apostle Thomas, who, according to their tradition, came to the Malabar coast in the 1st century CE. They speak Malayalam and have their own ancient forms of worship.
- **Goa**, ruled by Portugal from 1510 until 1961, has many Catholic churches. Its old churches, including the Basilica of Bom Jesus, which holds the tomb of St. Francis Xavier, are a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- **Northeast India:** Christians are the majority in the states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya.
- **Pakistan:** the 2023 census counted about 3.3 million Christians (1.37%), most of them in Punjab. Some church leaders say the real number is higher.
- **Sri Lanka:** about 6.9% of people were Christian in the 2024 census, most of them Roman Catholic, among Sinhala, Tamil and Burgher communities.

In India as a whole, Christians were 2.3% of the population in 2011, about 28 million people. South Asian churches celebrate Christmas with local touches: star lanterns, carols in regional languages and festive sweets.

5.10 Smaller Communities, Long Histories

Two communities in South Asia are small in number but have long, important histories.

Zoroastrians (Parsis)

Zoroastrians (Parsis) are followers of Zoroastrianism, an ancient faith founded by the prophet Zoroaster (Zarathustra) in Iran. In South Asia, most belong to the Parsi community, whose ancestors came from Iran. *Parsi*

means "Persian." According to the community's own story, the *Qissa-i Sanjan*, Zoroastrians left Iran to keep practicing their faith and landed on the coast of Gujarat. Historians place the migration somewhere between the 8th and 10th centuries.

In the story, the local king worried that his kingdom was already full. A Parsi priest answered by stirring sugar into a vessel of milk: like the sugar, the newcomers would blend in and sweeten life without making it overflow. Parsis often tell this story to explain how they settled in.

Zoroastrians teach the ideals of good thoughts, good words and good deeds, and believe each person chooses between good and evil. They pray in fire temples, where a sacred fire is kept burning. The Iranshah fire at Udvada, Gujarat, is the most revered in India, and tradition dates it to the community's earliest years. Parsis celebrate Navroz, the New Year. Most Parsis in South Asia live in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), and there are smaller communities in Karachi and other cities.

Jewish Communities

Jewish Communities in South Asia are the old Jewish groups that settled in India, especially on the west coast, long before modern times. Jews believe in one God and a covenant (a sacred agreement) between God and the Jewish people, and they study the Torah. Their place of worship is a synagogue.

There were three main communities:

- **Cochin Jews** in Kerala. The Paradesi Synagogue in Kochi, built in 1568, is the oldest active synagogue in the Commonwealth.
- **Bene Israel**, who lived for centuries in villages of the Konkan coast and later moved to Mumbai, where they opened their first synagogue in 1796.

- **Baghdadi Jews**, traders from the Middle East who settled first in Surat (from 1730) and later in Mumbai and Kolkata.

India's Jewish population peaked in the 1940s and declined quickly after 1948, as most moved to the new state of Israel. Most Cochin Jews left in the mid-1950s. Small communities remain, and their synagogues are still cared for.

5.11 Pilgrimage: Journeys of Faith

Pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place for prayer, blessing, remembrance or renewal. Every faith in this chapter has pilgrimage places, and South Asia is full of them.

Faith	Pilgrimage example	Where
Hinduism	The Kumbh Mela, where millions bathe in a sacred river. It rotates among four cities	Prayagraj (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik, India
Hinduism	Hinglaj Yatra	Balochistan, Pakistan
Buddhism	The Buddha's birthplace and place of enlightenment	Lumbini, Nepal; Bodh Gaya, India
Buddhism	The Temple of the Tooth Relic	Kandy, Sri Lanka
Islam	The hajj to Mecca, plus visits to Sufi shrines such as Ajmer and Data Darbar	Saudi Arabia; Rajasthan, India; Lahore, Pakistan

Faith	Pilgrimage example	Where
Sikhism	The Golden Temple; Nankana Sahib and Kartarpur	Amritsar, India; Punjab, Pakistan
Christianity	The Basilica of Bom Jesus	Old Goa, India
Zoroastrianism	The Iranshah fire temple	Udvada, Gujarat, India

UNESCO lists the Kumbh Mela as part of humanity's Intangible Cultural Heritage (2017) and calls it the largest peaceful gathering of pilgrims on Earth.

Some pilgrimage places are shared. Adam's Peak (Sri Pada) in Sri Lanka is a 2,243 m mountain with a footprint-shaped rock at the top. In Buddhist tradition it is the Buddha's footprint; many Hindus see it as Shiva's; and in some Muslim and Christian traditions it is the footprint of Adam or of St. Thomas. Pilgrims of all four faiths climb it, often through the night to watch the sunrise. The Ajmer dargah of Moinuddin Chishti, too, draws many Hindus as well as Muslims.

5.12 Religious Pluralism

Religious Pluralism means many faiths living side by side in the same society, and, as an ideal, people of different faiths respecting each other's right to believe and practice. South Asia has lived with pluralism for thousands of years. That history includes deep friendships and shared traditions, and also real conflict and discrimination.

Some signs of shared life:

- **Shared ideas.** In Pew's 2021 survey of India, the same share of Hindus and Muslims (77%) said they believe in karma.
- **Shared places.** Hindus visit Sufi dargahs; Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians climb Adam's Peak; anyone may eat at a gurdwara's langar.
- **Shared scripture.** The Guru Granth Sahib includes hymns by Hindu and Muslim saints.
- **Shared values.** In the same survey, most Indians of every major faith said respecting all religions is very important to being truly Indian.

But the same Pew report was titled "Tolerance and Segregation." It found that many people in India, while valuing respect for other faiths, said their close friends came mostly from their own group, and large majorities of both Hindus and Muslims said it was very important to stop members of their community from marrying outside the faith. Across the region, religious minorities have at times faced discrimination and violence, and communal violence has caused terrible suffering on all sides, as [Chapter 4](#) shows for Partition. Pluralism is not automatic. It is something communities build and protect.

Whose Story?

Who gets to define a faith? Many Hindus prefer the name Sanatana Dharma to "Hinduism," a label that grew from an outsider's word. Many Sikhs object when textbooks call Sikhism a "mix" of Hinduism and Islam, because in Sikh understanding it is a distinct revelation through Guru Nanak. In Pakistan, some church leaders say the 2023 census undercounted Christians, whom it counted at 1.37% of the population. Ahmadis describe themselves as Muslims, but most other Muslims reject their belief that their founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was a prophet. Since 1974, Pakistan's constitution has classified them as non-Muslims, so the same people are counted differently depending on who is counting. That's why this book describes each faith the way its own followers usually describe it, and notes where counts are disputed.

Diagram: Faith Explorer

Faith Explorer

Tap a faith, then pick a lens below. Tick Compare to see two faiths side by side.

Buddhism
Vihara / temple

Hinduism
Mandir

Jainism
Jain temple

Jewish communities
Synagogue

Zoroastrians (Parsis)
Fire temple

Christianity
Church

2
Islam
Masjid (mosque)

1
Sikhism
Gurdwara

Smaller communities

Alphabetical order, equal sizes: not a ranking.

Lens: Place of worship

Sikhism
A gurdwara, "door to the Guru." Everyone covers their head and removes shoes. The free community kitchen, langar, feeds all visitors.

Islam
A masjid (mosque). Many Muslims, and people of other faiths too, visit dargahs, the shrines of Sufi saints, such as the dargah at Ajmer.

Sikhism

Islam

Faith 1 (orange) and faith 2 (teal)

Place of worship

☒ Compare

Lens and Compare

[Back to Faith Explorer Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch05-faith-explorer/main.html>

Open the Faith Explorer fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Faith Explorer

sim-id: ch05-faith-explorer

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Analyze

Bloom Verb: compare

Learning Objective: The learner will compare South Asian faiths on the same five dimensions (origins, sacred texts, place of worship, a major festival, a core idea) without ranking them.

Canvas: responsive width; 690 px drawing area plus 100 px control area.

Controls: first-faith menu, second-faith menu, lens menu, Compare checkbox; click or tap any faith tile.

Behavior: Eight equal-sized tiles in alphabetical order (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism, then a "Smaller communities" row with Jewish communities and Zoroastrians (Parsis)) with a note that the order is not a ranking. Choosing a faith and a lens shows a short card written in followers' terms. Compare mode (on at start) shows two faiths side by side through the same lens; the sim opens on Sikhism and Islam through the "Place of worship" lens.

The sim opens in Compare mode with Sikhism and Islam side by side through the Place of worship lens. Start there, then switch the lens to Sacred texts, A major festival and A core idea, and read both cards each time. Then tap different tiles to compare other pairs: Hinduism and Jainism on "A core idea," or Buddhism and Christianity on "Origins."

As you compare, notice what is similar and what is different, and notice the note under the tiles: the order is alphabetical and every tile is the same size. Try writing one sentence for each pair that compares them without saying

either is better. That's harder than it sounds, and it's exactly the skill this chapter is about.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about what faith practice meant in their childhood home, and how they practice now. If your family is not religious, ask about the values they grew up with and how those values were passed down. 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: Faith can be personal. Ask if they're comfortable talking about it, let them skip any question, and ask permission before taking notes.

Questions to ask

1. When you were a child, what did a normal day or week of faith (or family values) look like in your home?
2. Is there a prayer, song, story or ritual you remember from childhood? What did it mean to you then?
3. Where did your family go to worship or celebrate, and what was it like inside?
4. Did you have friends or neighbors of other faiths? What did you learn from them, or share with them?
5. How has your practice changed over your life, or since moving to a new country?

6. What do you most want younger people in our family to understand or keep?

Listen for: practices such as Puja, Langar or the Five Pillars of Islam in South Asia; moments of Pilgrimage; and stories of Religious Pluralism, such as neighbors of different faiths sharing festivals or food.

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 their faith (or values) with how this chapter describes it. What did the chapter get right, and what did your elder add that a short summary can't capture? If a friend interviewed someone of a different faith, list one practice that is similar and one that is different, without ranking them.

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

Common Misconceptions

Myth: Hinduism has one holy book, like a Hindu Bible.

Reality: Hinduism has many sacred texts, including the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Mahabharata (with the Bhagavad Gita) and the Puranas, and different communities value different ones most.

Myth: Sikhism is a mix of Hinduism and Islam.

Reality: Sikhs understand their faith as a distinct revelation through Guru Nanak and the Gurus who followed him, with its own scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, and its own practices such as langar. The scripture includes

some hymns by Hindu and Muslim saints, but that doesn't make Sikhism a blend.

Myth: All Buddhists are the same.

Reality: Buddhism has several schools. Sri Lanka follows Theravada, with the Pali Canon, while Bhutan and Himalayan Nepal follow Vajrayana, with Tibetan teachings and rituals. Their temples, festivals and practices differ.

Myth: South Asian Muslims are recent converts or outsiders.

Reality: Muslims have lived in South Asia for well over a thousand years, starting with traders on the coasts in the 600s and 700s. Most South Asian Muslims descend from families who have lived in the region for many centuries.

Myth: Religion and country map one-to-one: India is Hindu, Pakistan is Muslim, Sri Lanka is Buddhist.

Reality: Every South Asian country is home to several faiths. India had about 172 million Muslims in 2011, Bangladesh has millions of Hindus, Sri Lanka has large Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities, and Sikhism's holiest sites include places in Pakistan.

Check Yourself

? 1. Name the four faiths in this chapter that began in South Asia. ✓

Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism.

? 2. What is the difference between Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism, and where is each found in South Asia? ✓

Theravada uses the Pali Canon and is the Buddhism of Sri Lanka. Vajrayana developed later, uses Mahayana and Tibetan teachings and rituals, and is the Buddhism of Bhutan and Himalayan Nepal.

? 3. What is langar, and what idea does it express? ✓

Langar is the free community kitchen of a gurdwara, where everyone sits together and eats the same meal regardless of religion, caste, gender or wealth. It expresses the Sikh teaching that all people are equal.

? 4. Why did Sunni and Shia Islam separate? ✓

They disagreed about who should lead the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died in 632: Sunnis accept the choice of Abu Bakr, while Shias believe the Prophet named Ali.

? 5. What does ahimsa mean, and which faith puts it at the very center of life? ✓

Ahimsa means non-violence toward all living beings. Jainism puts it at the center, which is why many Jains are strict vegetarians.

Exercises

Remember

1. Match each faith to its place of worship: Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism.

 Answer

Hinduism: mandir (temple). Islam: masjid (mosque). Sikhism: gurdwara.
Zoroastrianism: fire temple. Judaism: synagogue.

2. Who compiled the first version of the Guru Granth Sahib, and in what year?

 Answer

Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh Guru, in 1604.

Understand

1. Explain the idea of karma and rebirth in your own words, and name two faiths besides Hinduism that use the idea.

 Answer

Karma is the belief that a person's actions and intentions have effects, in this life and in future lives, as the soul is reborn in a cycle. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism also speak of karma and rebirth, each in its own way.

2. Explain why India's 14.2% Muslim share in 2011 still meant one of the largest Muslim populations in the world.

Answer

India's total population is so large that 14.2% was about 172 million people, more than the total population of most countries.

Apply

1. Use the Faith Explorer in Compare mode. Pick two faiths and one lens, and write three sentences comparing them without using the words "better," "worse," "real" or "true." *Hint: start with "Both..." and "In contrast..."*
2. Your school is planning a multi-faith calendar for the club. Choose four faiths from this chapter and list one major festival for each, with one sentence explaining what it marks. *Hint: the "A major festival" lens in the sim will help.*

Analyze

1. Look at the faith map table in 5.3. Identify two countries where a minority faith includes millions of people, and explain why "minority" doesn't mean "small" in South Asia. *Hint: compare percentages with each country's total population from Chapter 1.*
2. Analyze Adam's Peak as an example of religious pluralism. What does it show, and what are the limits of using one shared site to describe relations between faiths? *Hint: the Pew report title "Tolerance and Segregation" is a useful clue.*

Evaluate

1. A classmate's slide says "Sikhism = Hinduism + Islam." Evaluate the slide and suggest a fairer one-sentence description. *Hint: think about how Sikhs describe their own faith.*
2. Some people say it's impossible to compare faiths fairly. Using the five lenses and the ground rules in 5.2, evaluate whether this chapter's approach works, and suggest one improvement. *Hint: what might the five lenses leave out?*

Create

1. Design a respectful "visitor's guide" card for one place of worship in your area (or one from the chapter): what to wear, what to do with shoes, how to behave, and one question to ask a member. *Hint: check the place's own website or ask a member before finishing.*
2. Write a short scene (150 to 200 words) in which two friends of different faiths explain one festival to each other. Show curiosity and respect. *Hint: use at least three concept labels from this chapter.*

Key Takeaways

- South Asia is home to Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, which began there, and to Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Judaism, which arrived long ago and took deep root.
- Comparing faiths fairly means using the same lenses for each, describing beliefs as their followers do, and never ranking them.
- Hinduism has no single founder or book. Its key ideas include dharma, karma and rebirth, and puja, the offering of worship.

- Buddhism in South Asia includes Theravada (Sri Lanka) and Vajrayana (Bhutan, Himalayan Nepal). Jainism puts ahimsa, non-violence, at its center.
- Most South Asian Muslims are Sunni, with an important Shia minority. Muslims are the majority in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and the Maldives, and number about 172 million in India (2011).
- Sikhs honor the Guru Granth Sahib as their living Guru, and the langar feeds everyone as equals.
- Pilgrimage and shared sites show religious pluralism in action, but pluralism also involves real tensions that communities must work to overcome.

Shoes back on!



You can now explain eight faith traditions through the same five lenses, without ranking any of them. Next, in Chapter 6, we follow the languages and scripts in which so many of these prayers, songs and stories are written.

Quiz: Faiths of South Asia

Test your understanding of Chapter 5. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

Which school of Buddhism is followed by most Buddhists in Sri Lanka?

- A. Vajrayana
- B. Zen
- C. Theravada
- D. Pure Land

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **C**. Sri Lanka follows Theravada Buddhism, whose scriptures are the Pali Canon. Vajrayana is the main distractor: it is the Buddhism of Bhutan and Himalayan Nepal, not Sri Lanka.

Concept Tested: Theravada and Vajrayana **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

What is the Guru Granth Sahib?

- A. The Sikh scripture, which Sikhs honor as their living Guru
- B. The founder of Sikhism

C. The holiest gurdwara in Amritsar

D. A collection of Hindu epics translated into Punjabi

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. The Guru Granth Sahib is the Sikh scripture, first compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604. Guru Nanak founded Sikhism, and the Golden Temple is the holiest gurdwara, which is why B and C can sound plausible.

Concept Tested: Guru Granth Sahib **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

What does ahimsa mean?

A. Devotional singing in a temple

B. Non-violence toward all living beings

C. A pilgrimage to a sacred river

D. Fasting during a holy month

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Ahimsa means non-violence in action, word and thought. Jains put it at the center of their lives, and Hindus and Buddhists also value it. Fasting (D) is part of some Jain festivals, but it is not what the word means.

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

Question 4

Which statement best describes Hinduism?

- A. A religion founded by one teacher, with one holy book
- B. A branch of Buddhism that began in Nepal
- C. A religion that began in Arabia and spread to India
- D. A family of related traditions with no single founder and many sacred texts

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. Hinduism grew over thousands of years from many traditions and has many sacred texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, epics and Puranas. Option A describes the common misconception that Hinduism has "one holy book."

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

Question 5

Why did Sunni and Shia Islam become separate branches?

- A. They disagreed about who should lead the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad died.
- B. They use different holy books.
- C. Shia Muslims do not follow the Five Pillars.
- D. Sunni Islam began in South Asia, while Shia Islam began in Arabia.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Sunnis accept the community's choice of Abu Bakr as the first leader, while Shias believe the Prophet named Ali. Both branches share the Quran and the Five Pillars, so B and C are wrong.

Concept Tested: Sunni and Shia Islam **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

What idea does langar, the free community kitchen of a gurdwara, express?

- A. That only Sikhs may eat food blessed in a gurdwara
- B. That fasting is the most important form of worship
- C. That all people are equal, so everyone eats together regardless of religion, caste, gender or wealth
- D. That food should be offered to the scripture before anyone eats

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Langar is served free to anyone who comes, and everyone sits together as equals, reflecting Guru Nanak's teaching of equality. Option A is the opposite of the truth: visitors of every faith are welcome.

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

Question 7

Ben visits a gurdwara for the first time with Simran. Based on the chapter, what should he expect to do?

- A. Keep his shoes on and stand during the service
- B. Remove his shoes, cover his head, and sit on the floor, possibly eating langar afterward
- C. Bring an offering of meat for the community meal
- D. Show proof that he is a Sikh before entering

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. Visitors to a gurdwara remove their shoes and cover their heads, sit on the floor, and are welcome at langar. Option C is wrong because langar is vegetarian, and D is wrong because gurdwaras welcome respectful visitors of every faith.

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

Question 8

A classmate writes, "Pakistan is Muslim, India is Hindu, and Sri Lanka is Buddhist, so each faith has its own country." Which fact from the chapter best shows the problem with this claim?

- A. SAARC was founded in 1985.
- B. Bhutan follows Vajrayana Buddhism.
- C. The Kumbh Mela rotates among four cities.
- D. India had about 172 million Muslims in 2011, and Sri Lanka's 2024 census found large Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Every South Asian country is home to several faiths, and even minority shares can mean millions of people. Option B is true but doesn't address the claim that religion and country line up one-to-one.

Concept Tested: Religious Pluralism **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

Adam's Peak in Sri Lanka is visited by Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians, who each explain its footprint differently. What does this example best show?

- A. That the four faiths have merged into one religion in Sri Lanka
- B. That one faith's explanation of the footprint is the correct one
- C. That a single sacred place can hold different meanings for different faiths, an example of religious pluralism
- D. That pilgrimage is only important in Buddhism

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Shared sites like Adam's Peak show people of different faiths valuing the same place in their own ways. The faiths remain distinct (so A is wrong), and the book does not rank one explanation above another (so B is wrong).

Concept Tested: Pilgrimage **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

Pew Research Center's 2021 report on religion in India was titled "Tolerance and Segregation." Which conclusion does the evidence in the chapter best support?

- A. Most Indians value respect for all religions, yet many keep their friendships and marriages within their own faith.
- B. Indians of different faiths share no beliefs at all.
- C. Religious tension in India has completely disappeared.
- D. Only Hindus in India believe in karma.

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **A**. The survey found that respect for all religions is widely valued, but many people's friends come mostly from their own group, and many oppose interfaith marriage. Option D is contradicted by the finding that 77% of both Hindus and Muslims said they believe in karma.

Concept Tested: Religious Pluralism **Bloom's Level:** Analyze