

Chapter 19: Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

Summary

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka sit on opposite sides of the Bay of Bengal, and the land in each could hardly be more different. One is a huge, flat river delta, the other a mountainous island. This chapter tours Bangladesh first: its capital, the rivers and floods that shape daily life, the Sundarbans mangrove forest, the language movement that gave the world International Mother Language Day, and its garment and microfinance industries. Then it crosses to Sri Lanka: its capital cities, the ancient city of Anuradhapura, the Sinhala and Tamil peoples, the long civil war, Ceylon tea and the sacred mountain of Sri Pada. For both countries you'll also get a short, dated look at who is in charge as of October 2026.

Concepts Covered

1. People's Republic of Bangladesh
2. Dhaka
3. Bengal Delta
4. Sundarbans
5. Rivers and Floods
6. Ekushey February
7. Garment Industry

8. Microfinance
9. Sri Lanka
10. Colombo
11. Anuradhapura
12. Sinhala Language
13. Sri Lankan Tamils
14. Sri Lankan Civil War
15. Ceylon Tea
16. Sri Pada (Adam's Peak)

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?** for the monsoon and the great rivers
- **Chapter 4: Colonialism, Independence, and Partition** for 1947 and the Liberation War of 1971
- **Chapter 6: Languages and Scripts** for Bangla, Sinhala and Tamil
- **Chapter 7: Festivals Through the Year** is helpful for the April new years

Across the Bay of Bengal



Hi, I'm Mora! The shirt you're wearing may well have been sewn in Bangladesh, and the tea in your cupboard may say "Ceylon" on the box. These two countries touch your daily life more than you might think. If your family comes from either one, this chapter gives you words for the rivers, mountains and stories you hear about at home.

19.1 Two New Years in One Week

It's April, and Zara Hossain is excited. At home, her family is getting ready for Pohela Boishakh, the Bengali New Year, with new clothes, sweets and her Nanu's stories about the big parade in Dhaka. At the South Asian Student Association meeting, she brings a plate of sweets and announces, "Shubho Noboborsho! Happy New Year!"

Dilan Perera, whose family is from Kandy in Sri Lanka, looks up from his phone. "Wait, it's our New Year this week too." His family celebrates the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, with oil lamps, a special milk rice and games in the yard at his grandparents' house. "My grandmother says the exact time for lighting the hearth is set by astrologers, down to the minute."

Ben Lindqvist is lost. "Hang on. You're from Bangladesh, and you're from Sri Lanka. Those aren't even next to each other. How do you both have New Year in the same week of April? And why isn't it in January?" Zara and Dilan look at each other. Neither has ever thought about it. And Ben's next question is even bigger: "What are your countries actually like?"

19.2 A Delta and an Island

Start with a river you know. The Mississippi begins at Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota and flows about 3,766 km (2,340 miles) south to a delta in the Gulf of Mexico. A **delta** is the flat, fan-shaped land a river builds where it meets the sea, as it drops the mud and sand it has carried for hundreds of miles. Delta land is low, fertile and often flooded. New Orleans sits near the Mississippi's delta.

Now imagine a country that is almost all delta, where three great rivers come together, two of them carrying about as much water as the Mississippi or

more, and where tens of millions of people live on land only a few meters above the sea. That is Bangladesh.

Then imagine an island with mountains in the middle, beaches all around, and a history of kingdoms going back more than 2,000 years. That is Sri Lanka.

The two countries face each other across the Bay of Bengal, the big bay of the Indian Ocean east of India. The monsoon shapes both of them ([Chapter 1](#)). But one lives with rivers, and the other with the sea and the mountains. As you read, keep asking how the land shapes the way people live.

As for Ben's question about April: both new years follow old South Asian calendars that start the year in spring. In Sri Lanka, the new year marks the moment the sun moves into the sign of Aries, usually on 13 or 14 April. In Bangladesh, Pohela Boishakh (পহেলা বৈশাখ, *PO-heh-la BOI-shakh*), "the first of Boishakh," falls on 14 April. Neighbors in India, Nepal and Southeast Asia celebrate new years in the same season, as you saw in [Chapter 7](#).

19.3 The People's Republic of Bangladesh

A country born from a language and a war

The **People's Republic of Bangladesh** is the official name of Bangladesh: a parliamentary republic in the eastern part of the old region of Bengal, independent since 1971, with Bangla (Bengali) as its state language. The name means "country of the Bengalis." Bangla (বাংলা, *BANG-lah*) is both the name of the language and an old name for the region.

Bangladesh's story runs through [Chapter 4](#). In 1947, when British India was divided, the Muslim-majority eastern half of Bengal became East Pakistan, part of a Pakistan whose two wings were separated by the whole width of northern India. Many Bengalis felt the government in West Pakistan treated

them unfairly, starting with language, as you'll see in Section 19.6. After years of tension and a brutal war, Bangladesh declared independence on 26 March 1971, and the Liberation War ended on 16 December 1971. Its constitution was adopted on 4 November 1972.

Bangladesh had **175,686,899 people in 2025** (about 176 million, World Bank), making it one of the ten most populous countries in the world. Fit that many people into an area of about 148,000 km², about the size of Iowa, and you get one of the most densely populated large countries on Earth. In Bangladesh's 2022 census, about 91% of people were Muslim and about 8% Hindu, with smaller Buddhist and Christian communities.

Bangladesh's national anthem, "Amar Shonar Bangla" ("My Golden Bengal"), was written by Rabindranath Tagore, the same poet who wrote India's anthem ([Chapter 17](#)). One poet wrote the anthems of two neighboring nations, because Bengal's culture is older than any border.

Dhaka

Dhaka (ঢাকা, *DHAH-kah*) is the capital and largest city of Bangladesh, on the Buriganga River in the middle of the country. It is one of the most crowded cities in the world, full of rickshaws, buses, markets, mosques and universities.

Dhaka has been a capital before. In the 1600s it was the capital of the Mughal province of Bengal and was named Jahangirnagar, "city of Jahangir," after the emperor. Under the Mughals it became a center of trade and of fine cotton cloth called muslin ([Chapter 12](#)). Today the city's most famous modern landmark is the National Parliament building, the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, designed by the American architect Louis Kahn.

Zara's family is from Chattogram (formerly Chittagong), Bangladesh's main seaport on the Bay of Bengal, in the southeast. When her Nanu talks about "going to Dhaka," she means a long trip to the big, busy capital.

19.4 The Bengal Delta, Rivers and Floods

The world's largest delta

The **Bengal Delta** (also called the Ganges–Brahmaputra Delta) is the vast, low plain built by the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers where they flow into the Bay of Bengal. It is the largest river delta in the world, and most of Bangladesh, along with the Indian state of West Bengal, sits on it.

Three great rivers meet here, and in Bangladesh they go by local names:

River	Name in Bangladesh	Where it comes from
Ganges	Padma	From the Himalaya, across northern India
Brahmaputra	Jamuna	From Tibet, through Northeast India
Meghna	Meghna	From the hills of Northeast India and eastern Bangladesh

The Padma and the Jamuna join, then meet the Meghna, and the combined water pours into the sea. These rivers carry huge amounts of mud from the Himalaya, and over thousands of years that mud built the land. About 83% of Bangladesh is floodplain, land that rivers flood and rebuild.

Rivers and Floods

Rivers and Floods in Bangladesh means the yearly rhythm in which monsoon rain and Himalayan meltwater raise the rivers, which spread

across the low delta, bringing both fertile soil and danger. Life in Bangladesh moves with this rhythm.

The most important fact is that most of the water in Bangladesh's rivers comes from rain that falls outside the country, upstream in India, Nepal, Bhutan and China. It flows in mostly through the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. So when heavy monsoon rain falls on India, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, Bangladesh feels it.

- **In an average year**, about 21% of Bangladesh floods (about 31,000 km²).
- **In severe years**, much more. In 1998, more than two-thirds of the country was under water, including half of Dhaka.

Floods are not only disasters. A normal flood soaks the fields and leaves behind fresh silt, the fine mud that makes delta soil so fertile for rice, jute and fish. Many farmers depend on it. The trouble comes when floods are too high, too long, or arrive at the wrong time.

The coast faces another danger: cyclones, the Indian Ocean's hurricanes. The Bholá cyclone of November 1970 killed at least 300,000 people and possibly as many as 500,000, the deadliest tropical cyclone on record. Since then, Bangladesh has built cyclone shelters along the coast and trained tens of thousands of volunteers to warn villages, and cyclone deaths have fallen sharply.

Think about it



Most of Bangladesh's river water comes from other countries. What kinds of agreements might Bangladesh need with its neighbors, and why would sharing rivers be tricky?

19.5 The Sundarbans

The **Sundarbans** (সুন্দরবন, *SHOON-dor-bon*) is the world's largest mangrove forest, on the coast of the Bengal Delta, shared by Bangladesh and India. Its name means "beautiful forest" in Bangla, and may refer to the sundari trees that grow there.

A **mangrove** is a tree that grows in salty coastal water, standing on tangled roots, some of which poke up out of the mud to breathe. The Sundarbans covers about 10,000 km², and about 60% of it lies in Bangladesh. It is a maze of tidal rivers, mudflats and small islands that flood and drain twice a day with the tides.

The forest is famous for the Bengal tiger, which here swims between islands, along with about 260 bird species and estuarine crocodiles. UNESCO listed India's part of the Sundarbans as a World Heritage site in 1987 and Bangladesh's part in 1997. The mangroves also protect the coast, softening storm surges from cyclones before they reach villages.

People live around the forest's edges and enter it to fish, collect honey and cut wood, which can be dangerous because of the tigers. Communities living near the Sundarbans have long told stories of Bonbibi, a forest guardian honored by both Muslim and Hindu families, which you can explore with your elders.

19.6 Ekushey February: Dying for a Language

Ekushey February (একুশে ফেব্রুয়ারি, *ay-KOO-sheh FEB-roo-ah-ree*), "the twenty-first of February," is the day in 1952 when students in Dhaka were killed while protesting for Bangla to be a state language of Pakistan, now remembered in Bangladesh as Language Martyrs' Day and around the world as International Mother Language Day.

After 1947, Pakistan's leaders wanted Urdu to be the only national language. But most people in East Pakistan spoke Bangla, and in fact Bangla speakers were the majority of all Pakistanis. Students at the University of Dhaka and others organized protests. On 21 February 1952 they defied a ban on gatherings, and police opened fire. Several protesters were killed.

The killings strengthened the movement. In 1956, Pakistan made Bengali one of its official languages. The language movement also helped build the Bengali national identity that led to independence in 1971.

Today, every 21 February, people in Bangladesh walk barefoot at dawn to the Shaheed Minar (Martyrs' Monument) near Dhaka Medical College to lay flowers. In 1999, UNESCO declared 21 February **International Mother Language Day**, so the whole world now marks a date that began in Dhaka.

Zara thinks about this a lot. She understands Bangla but usually answers her Nanu in English. Knowing that students died for the right to speak it makes her want to try harder.

19.7 Making a Living: Garments and Microfinance

The Garment Industry

Bangladesh's **Garment Industry** is the large, mostly export-oriented industry of factories that sew clothing for brands around the world, the country's biggest source of export earnings. Look at the tags on your T-shirts and jeans: "Made in Bangladesh" is very common.

- In the 2024–25 fiscal year, Bangladesh's ready-made garment exports were worth about 39 billion US dollars.
- Garments made up more than four-fifths of the country's export earnings in that period.

- Millions of people work in the factories, and many of them are women.

The industry has brought jobs and growth, but it has also brought hard questions about pay and safety. On 24 April 2013, the Rana Plaza building near Dhaka, which held several garment factories, collapsed. The final death toll was 1,134 people, most of them garment workers. The disaster led to new building-safety agreements between brands, unions and factory owners. Many people around the world began asking who made their clothes and under what conditions.

Microfinance

Microfinance is the practice of giving very small loans and other banking services to poor people, especially women, who have no property to offer as security and cannot borrow from ordinary banks. A small loan might let someone buy a cow, a sewing machine or stock for a small shop.

Bangladesh made microfinance famous. In 1976, Muhammad Yunus, an economics professor at the University of Chittagong, began a research project lending tiny sums to villagers in Jobra, near the university. In 1983 it became the Grameen Bank, an independent bank. "Grameen" means "of the village." Its borrowers were mostly women, organized in small groups that supported one another.

In 2006, Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank jointly won the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to create development "from below." Microfinance spread to dozens of countries, including the United States. Economists still debate how much it reduces poverty on its own, and some borrowers have struggled with debt. But it changed how the world thinks about banking for the poor.

19.8 Bangladesh Today

Bangladesh's politics have changed quickly in the last few years, so here is a short, dated summary.

- **July–August 2024:** Student-led protests against a quota system for government jobs grew into a nationwide uprising against the government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who had governed since 2009. A United Nations human rights report released in February 2025 estimated that as many as 1,400 people may have been killed between 1 July and 15 August 2024, and it blamed most of the serious violations on the former government and its security forces. Hasina's supporters rejected the report as inaccurate. On 5 August 2024, Hasina resigned and left for India.
- **August 2024 to February 2026:** An interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, the Nobel laureate, as chief adviser, took office on 8 August 2024. In November 2025, a Bangladeshi tribunal sentenced Hasina, in her absence, to death for crimes against humanity over the crackdown. She rejected the verdict and the tribunal. Her party, the Awami League, was barred from the next election.
- **February 2026:** A general election was held on 12 February 2026, along with a referendum that approved a package of reforms known as the July Charter. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its allies won more than two-thirds of the seats. Its leader, Tarique Rahman, was sworn in as prime minister on 17 February 2026, and the Jamaat-e-Islami party and its allies became the main opposition.
- **July–August 2026:** President Mohammed Shahabuddin resigned for health reasons on 24 July 2026. Parliament elected Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir of the BNP, who was sworn in as president on 21 August 2026.

As of October 2026, Tarique Rahman is prime minister and Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir is president. Bangladeshis, at home and abroad, hold strongly different views about these events, and families may disagree at the same

dinner table. This book describes what happened and leaves the arguments to the news.

Ask, don't assume



Politics in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka can be painful family topics. If you want to ask an elder about them, start with "What do you remember?" rather than "Who was right?"

19.9 Sri Lanka: An Island Nation

From Ceylon to Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is an island country in the Indian Ocean, just across the narrow Palk Strait from the southeast tip of India, independent since 1948 and called Ceylon until 1972. Its official name today is the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. Europeans called the island Ceylon; the Portuguese and Dutch ruled its coasts, and the British ruled the whole island. It became independent on 4 February 1948 as the Dominion of Ceylon, and in 1972 it became a republic and took the name Sri Lanka (ශ්‍රී ලංකා in Sinhala).

Sri Lanka had **21,756,000 people in 2025** (about 22 million, World Bank). Its own 2024 census, released in October 2025, counted 21,781,800 people.

The island is not part of India, but the two are close neighbors. A narrow, shallow strait, the Palk Strait, separates them, and a chain of shoals and sandbanks almost links them. Sri Lanka has its own government, flag, currency (the Sri Lankan rupee) and history going back thousands of years.

Peoples and faiths

According to the 2024 census:

Group	Share of Sri Lanka's people (2024)
Sinhalese	74.1%
Sri Lankan Tamils	12.3%
Muslims (often called Moors)	10.5%
Indian-origin (Hill Country) Tamils	2.8%
Burghers, Malays, Veddas and others	0.3%

By religion, the census counted about 69.8% Buddhists, 12.6% Hindus, 10.7% Muslims and about 6.9% Christians (5.6% Roman Catholic and 1.3% other Christians). Notice that faith and language don't line up neatly: most Sinhalese are Buddhist and most Tamils are Hindu, but there are Sinhalese and Tamil Christians, and Sri Lankan Muslims mostly speak Tamil.

The Sinhala Language

The **Sinhala Language** (සිංහල, *SING-ha-la*) is the language of the Sinhalese people, the majority of Sri Lankans, an Indo-Aryan language with its own rounded script, related to the languages of North India and most closely to Dhivehi, the language of the Maldives. Sinhala is spoken by about 16 million people. Its rounded letters are written left to right, like Hindi or Bangla, and the language has a written history of more than 2,000 years, starting with inscriptions in a Prakrit close to the languages of the Buddha's time.

Language became the center of a bitter political fight. In 1956, the Sinhala Only Act made Sinhala the sole official language of Ceylon, replacing English

and leaving out Tamil, the first language of about 29% of the population at the time. For many Tamils it became a symbol of being shut out of government jobs, schools and courts. In 1987 a constitutional amendment made Tamil an official language too, with English as the "link language." Today Sinhala and Tamil are both official languages.

Sri Lankan Tamils

Sri Lankan Tamils are the Tamil-speaking people whose ancestors have lived in Sri Lanka for many centuries, mostly in the north and east of the island, with a long history centered on the Jaffna Peninsula. They are different from the Indian-origin, or Hill Country, Tamils, whose ancestors were brought from South India by the British in the 1800s and 1900s to work on coffee and tea plantations.

The Jaffna Peninsula, in the far north, is the heartland of Sri Lankan Tamil culture, with Hindu temples, its own style of Tamil speech and food, and a literary tradition that goes back to the medieval Jaffna Kingdom. Tamils celebrate the April new year as Puthandu (புத்தாண்டு, *POOT-tahn-doo*), "new year," at the same time as Sinhalese families celebrate Aluth Avurudda. That is why Dilan called it the "Sinhala and Tamil New Year."

19.10 Colombo and Anuradhapura

Colombo

Colombo (කොළඹ, *koh-LUM-boh*) is Sri Lanka's largest city and its commercial capital, a major port on the west coast. Colombo's harbor has been busy for centuries, visited by Arab, Portuguese, Dutch and British ships, and it is still a major port today.

Sri Lanka has two capitals. In 1982, Parliament moved to a new building in Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte, a suburb right next to Colombo, which is the official legislative capital. Colombo remains the commercial capital and the seat of the president's offices and the courts. Most people, and most maps, still think of Colombo as "the capital."

Anuradhapura

Anuradhapura (*uh-noo-RAH-duh-POO-ruh*) is an ancient royal capital in the dry north-central plains of Sri Lanka and a holy city for Buddhists. It flourished as a political and religious capital for about 1,300 years, until it was abandoned after an invasion in 993 CE.

According to Buddhist tradition, in the 200s BCE, the nun Sanghamitta, daughter of the Indian emperor Ashoka ([Chapter 2](#)), brought a cutting of the tree under which the Buddha reached enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. The tree that grew from it, the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi, still stands in Anuradhapura and is honored by Buddhist pilgrims as one of the oldest planted trees with a recorded history. Around it stand huge dome-shaped Buddhist monuments called stupas, monasteries, palaces and ancient water reservoirs. UNESCO listed the Sacred City of Anuradhapura as a World Heritage site in 1982.

Later capitals moved south, to Polonnaruwa and eventually to Kandy in the central hills. Kandy was the capital of the last independent Sinhalese kingdom until the British took it in 1815, and it is home to the Temple of the Tooth Relic, one of the most important Buddhist sites in the world. Dilan's family is from Kandy, and his grandmother visits the temple on full-moon days.

19.11 The Sri Lankan Civil War

A hard chapter of history



This section is about a war that many families lived through, on every side. Some classmates may have relatives who were killed, displaced or who fought. Read it with care, and talk about it with respect.

The **Sri Lankan Civil War** was an armed conflict from 1983 to 2009 between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, also called the Tamil Tigers), an armed group fighting for an independent Tamil state, Tamil Eelam, in the north and east of the island.

How it began

The roots of the war lay in the years after independence. Many Tamils felt shut out by laws like the Sinhala Only Act and by policies they saw as favoring the Sinhalese majority. Anti-Tamil riots broke out several times, including in 1958. In 1976 the main Tamil political parties called for a separate state, and armed groups, the strongest of which became the LTTE, began attacks.

In July 1983, the LTTE killed 13 soldiers in an ambush in the north. Anti-Tamil riots followed in Colombo and across the country, known as Black July: over about a week, mobs attacked and killed Tamil civilians and burned homes and shops. Estimates of the dead range from about 400 to 3,000, and about 150,000 people were made homeless. Many historians date the start of the civil war to these events.

A long war

The war lasted 26 years. An Indian Peace Keeping Force was sent to the north and east under a 1987 accord between India and Sri Lanka; it became

caught up in fighting with the LTTE and withdrew in 1990. A ceasefire brokered by Norway was signed in February 2002, but it broke down, and full-scale war resumed. In May 2009, the Sri Lankan military defeated the LTTE, and its leader was killed.

The suffering touched every community. The LTTE carried out suicide bombings, assassinated political leaders and attacked Sinhalese and Muslim civilians, and it used child soldiers. Government forces were accused of killing and disappearing Tamil civilians, especially in the final months, when hundreds of thousands of civilians were trapped in a small area of the northeast. Hundreds of thousands of people, mostly Tamils, were displaced, and many fled abroad, building large Sri Lankan Tamil communities in Canada, the United Kingdom and elsewhere.

How many died?

Numbers are uncertain and painful, so scholars give ranges:

- Shortly after the war ended, the United Nations estimated that **80,000 to 100,000 people** had been killed since the conflict began in the early 1980s.
- A UN panel of experts reported in 2011 that credible sources estimated there could have been **as many as 40,000 civilian deaths** in the final phase of the war in 2009, many of them from shelling. The panel found credible allegations of serious violations by both the government and the LTTE.
- The Sri Lankan government has given much lower figures for the final months and rejected the panel's findings.

Whose Story?

Sri Lankans tell the story of 2009 in very different ways. For many Sinhalese, and for the government, May 2009 marks the defeat of a group that had bombed buses, temples and markets for decades, and it is remembered as the end of terror and the return of peace. For many Tamils, at home and in the diaspora, the same weeks are remembered as a time of mass civilian death, and 18 May is a day of mourning. Sri Lankan Muslims remember being expelled from the north by the LTTE in October 1990 and being caught between both sides. Human rights groups and the United Nations have called for independent investigations of what happened, while successive governments have resisted international inquiries.

Not a religious war

Because most Sinhalese are Buddhist and most Tamils are Hindu, people sometimes call it a religious war. It wasn't, mainly. The conflict was about ethnicity, language, political power and land. The LTTE's goal was a Tamil homeland, not a Hindu one, and there were Christians on both sides. Religion was part of many people's identities, but it was not what the two sides were fighting over.

19.12 Ceylon Tea and the Hill Country

Ceylon Tea is the black tea grown on Sri Lanka's hill-country plantations, still sold around the world under the island's old name. It is one of Sri Lanka's best-known exports: in the first nine months of 2025 alone, tea exports earned about 1.16 billion US dollars.

Tea isn't native to Sri Lanka. In the 1800s, British planters grew coffee in the hills. Then, starting in 1869, a fungus called coffee leaf rust destroyed the

coffee plantations. Planters switched to tea, which a British planter named James Taylor had begun growing commercially in 1867. Within a few decades, the green, terraced slopes of the central highlands were covered in tea bushes.

The plantations depended on workers brought by the British from South India, the ancestors of today's Hill Country Tamils. For generations, many lived in crowded housing on the estates, with low pay, and a 1948 citizenship law left most of them without Sri Lankan citizenship for decades. Their descendants still make up much of the tea workforce, and many families today are still pushing for better wages and housing. So a cup of Ceylon tea carries a history of colonial plantations, migration and work.

19.13 Sri Pada (Adam's Peak)

Sri Pada (Adam's Peak) is a cone-shaped mountain 2,243 m (7,359 ft) high in central Sri Lanka, sacred to people of several faiths because of a footprint-shaped mark in the rock near its summit. Sri Pada (ශ්‍රී පාද) means "sacred footprint."

Each faith tells its own story about that mark:

Tradition	Whose footprint?
Buddhist	The Buddha's
Sri Lankan Hindu	Shiva's (its Tamil name means "mountain of Shiva's light")
Some Muslim and Christian traditions	Adam's, from his first step on Earth after leaving paradise (hence "Adam's Peak")

Pilgrims climb mostly between December and May, often at night by lit stairways, to reach the top at sunrise. At dawn, the mountain casts a perfect triangle of shadow across the plains below. Pilgrims of different faiths climb the same steps in the same crowd, and each honors the mark in their own way, so one mountain holds several stories at once.

19.14 Sri Lanka Today

Like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka has been through big changes recently.

- **2022 economic crisis:** After years of heavy debt, tax cuts and lost tourism, Sri Lanka ran out of foreign currency. In April 2022 the government announced it was defaulting on its foreign debt, the first default in its history. Fuel, food and medicine ran short, and huge protests, called the Aragalaya ("struggle"), filled the streets. President Gotabaya Rajapaksa left the country and resigned in July 2022, and Parliament elected Ranil Wickremesinghe to serve the rest of his term.
- **Recovery:** In March 2023, the International Monetary Fund approved a four-year loan program of about 3 billion US dollars, and the economy began to stabilize.
- **2024 elections:** Anura Kumara Dissanayake, of the National People's Power (NPP) alliance, won the presidential election and took office on 23 September 2024. In the parliamentary election of 14 November 2024, the NPP won 159 of 225 seats, the first time a single party won a two-thirds majority under the proportional voting system Sri Lanka has used since 1989. Harini Amarasuriya became prime minister.
- **Cyclone Ditwah:** In late November 2025, Cyclone Ditwah brought catastrophic floods and landslides. By early December, the Disaster Management Center reported more than 600 deaths, with Kandy District hit hardest.

- **2026:** In May 2026, the IMF completed another review of Sri Lanka's program, describing performance as generally strong while warning about the cyclone's aftermath. On 4 October 2026, IMF staff reached agreement on the seventh review, with the next payment of about 345 million US dollars depending on a 2027 budget that fits the program.

As of October 2026, Anura Kumara Dissanayake is president. Sri Lankans still disagree about what caused the crisis and what the country should do next.

19.15 Putting It Together

Back at the club meeting, Ben has eaten most of Zara's sweets and is now trying Dilan's milk rice. He's figured out the April question: both families follow spring calendars that are much older than the January one. And he's starting to see that "what is your country like?" has a different answer depending on the land.

	Bangladesh	Sri Lanka
Official name	People's Republic of Bangladesh	Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka
Capital	Dhaka	Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte (legislative); Colombo (commercial)
Population (2025, World Bank)	175,686,899 (about 176 million)	21,756,000 (about 22 million)
Land	Low, flat river delta	Island with central highlands

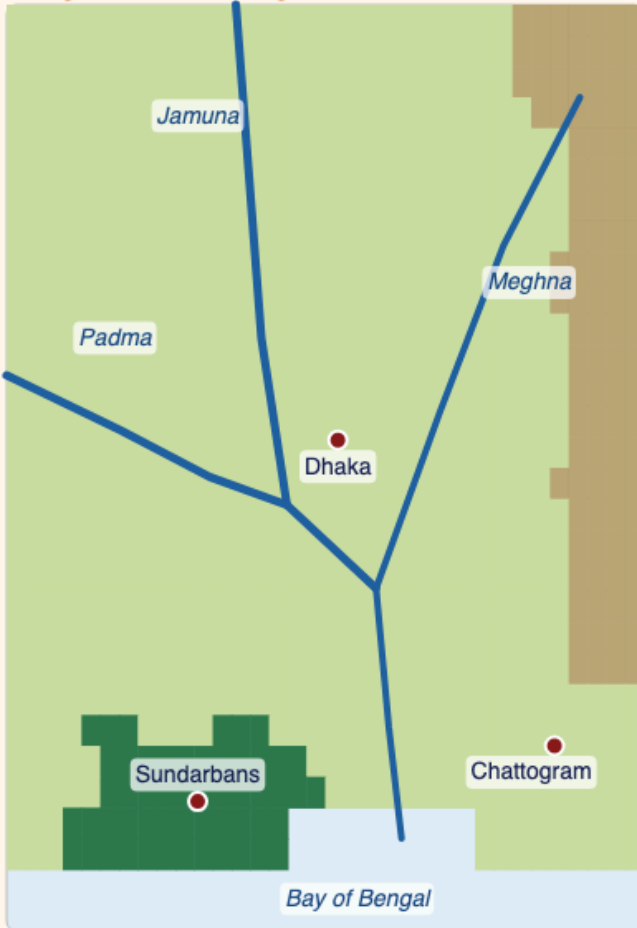
	Bangladesh	Sri Lanka
Independence	26 March 1971 (declared); war ended 16 December 1971	4 February 1948
Main languages	Bangla	Sinhala and Tamil (official); English (link)
Main faiths	Islam (about 91%), Hinduism	Buddhism (about 70%), Hinduism, Islam, Christianity
New year in April	Pohela Boishakh (14 April)	Sinhala and Tamil New Year (13 or 14 April)
A UNESCO site	The Sundarbans (1997)	Sacred City of Anuradhapura (1982)
Government (October 2026)	PM Tarique Rahman (BNP), since February 2026	President Anura Kumara Dissanayake (NPP), since September 2024

Diagram: Delta and Island

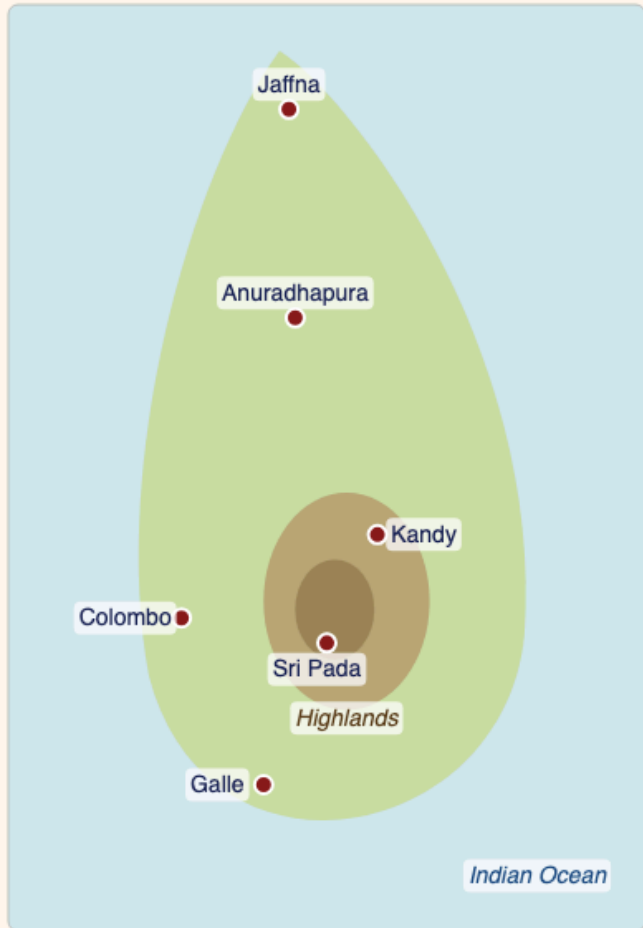
Delta and Island: Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

Raise the monsoon slider to flood the delta. Tap any dot for a card.

Bangladesh: the Bengal Delta



Sri Lanka: an island



Land under water: 0% (illustrative)

Average year: about 21%. 1998: more than two-thirds.

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

Compare the two

Bangladesh: 175,686,899 people (2025, World Bank), most living on a flat, low river delta. Sri Lanka: 21,756,000 people (2025, World Bank) on an island whose central highlands catch the monsoon rains.

Monsoon river level: 0%

Average year

Extreme year (1998)

Dry season

[Back to Delta and Island Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch19-bangladesh-srilanka-compare/main.html>

Open the Delta and Island fullscreen

MicroSim specification: Delta and Island

sim-id: ch19-bangladesh-srilanka-compare

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: explain, compare

Learning Objective: The learner will explain how geography shapes life in each country: the floods of the low Bengal Delta in Bangladesh and the highlands, coasts and ancient capitals of Sri Lanka.

Canvas: responsive width; 830 px drawing area plus 100 px control area.

Controls: monsoon river level slider; Average year, Extreme year (1998) and Dry season buttons; click or tap any dot.

Behavior: Left panel: a schematic delta where the Padma, Jamuna and Meghna rivers meet and flow to the Bay of Bengal, with dots for Dhaka, Chattogram and the Sundarbans. Raising the slider floods the lowest land first (near the rivers and coast) and reports the share of land under water, labeled illustrative; presets match the documented average (about 21%) and 1998 (more than two-thirds). Right panel: a stylized island (not a traced outline) with schematic central highlands and dots for Jaffna, Anuradhapura, Kandy, Sri Pada, Colombo and Galle. A card shows the 2025 populations (World Bank) or the selected place. The caption "Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders." appears inside the drawing area.

Start on the delta. Press **Average year** and watch where the blue spreads: along the three rivers and toward Dhaka and the coast. Then press **Extreme year (1998)**. Notice the land that stays dry: the higher ground in the north and the hills in the east. Ask yourself where you would build a village, a school

or a cyclone shelter. Tap the Sundarbans to remember how the mangroves protect the coast when the sea rises.

Then switch your eyes to the island. Tap Anuradhapura, Kandy and Colombo in order: you're following the island's capitals from ancient times to today. Tap Sri Pada and notice that it sits right in the highlands, where the tea grows and where Cyclone Ditwah's landslides hit hardest. Finally, compare: in Bangladesh, the danger and the gift both come from rivers; in Sri Lanka, the mountains catch the rain and shape where people live.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about rivers, rain, monsoons and storms where they grew up; the language they are proudest of; tea; and how they celebrated the new year. If your family is from Bangladesh or Sri Lanka, start there; if not, ask about any of these in their own home region. 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: Make a cup of tea together, or bring a new-year sweet. It's an easy way to begin, and it may remind them of a story.

Questions to ask

1. What did the monsoon season feel like where you grew up? Do you remember a big flood, cyclone or storm?
2. Which language did you grow up speaking, and how do you feel when you hear it far from home?

3. How did your family celebrate the new year? What did you eat, wear or do?
4. What did tea mean in your home? Who made it, and when?
5. How has your home town or village changed since you were young, or since you left?
6. What is one thing about our language or culture that you hope I keep?

Listen for: memories of Rivers and Floods or cyclones that connect to life on the Bengal Delta; pride in a language that echoes Ekushey February or the history of the Sinhala Language and Tamil; and rituals around Ceylon Tea or the April new year.

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 memory of the monsoon with what this chapter says about floods in Bangladesh. Was the rain mostly a danger, a blessing, or both? If a friend interviewed someone from a different country, compare how each family celebrates the new year.

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

Common Misconceptions

Myth: Bangladesh is mostly desert or dry land.

Reality: Bangladesh is one of the wettest, greenest countries in the world. Most of it is a low river delta, about 83% of it floodplain, and in an average year about 21% of the country floods.

Myth: Sri Lanka is part of India.

Reality: Sri Lanka is an independent island country, independent since 4 February 1948, with its own government, languages, currency and history. India is its close neighbor across the narrow Palk Strait.

Myth: The Sri Lankan civil war was a religious war between Buddhists and Hindus.

Reality: The war (1983 to 2009) was mainly about ethnicity, language, political power and land, between the government and the LTTE, which fought for a separate Tamil state. Religion overlapped with ethnic identity, but it was not the main cause, and there were Christians and others on both sides.

Myth: Ceylon tea is a native Sri Lankan plant that has always grown there.

Reality: British planters introduced tea as a commercial crop in 1867 and expanded it after coffee leaf rust destroyed the coffee plantations from 1869. The plantations relied on workers brought from South India.

Check Yourself

? 1. Which three rivers meet in the Bengal Delta, and what are two of them called in Bangladesh? ✓

The Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. In Bangladesh the Ganges is called the Padma and the Brahmaputra the Jamuna.

? 2. What happened on 21 February 1952, and how is the day remembered worldwide? ✓

Students in Dhaka were killed by police while protesting for Bangla to be a state language of Pakistan. Since 1999, UNESCO has marked 21 February as International Mother Language Day.

? 3. What is microfinance, and who won the Nobel Peace Prize for it in 2006? ✓

Microfinance means very small loans and banking services for poor people who can't borrow from ordinary banks. Muhammad Yunus and Grameen Bank shared the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize.

? 4. What is the difference between Sri Lankan Tamils and Hill Country Tamils? ✓

Sri Lankan Tamils have lived on the island for many centuries, mostly in the north and east. Hill Country (Indian-origin) Tamils descend from workers the British brought from South India in the 1800s and 1900s to work on plantations.

? 5. Why is Sri Pada sacred to more than one faith? ✓

A footprint-shaped mark near the summit is honored by Buddhists as the Buddha's, by many Sri Lankan Hindus as Shiva's, and in some Muslim and Christian traditions as Adam's.

Exercises

Remember

1. Give the capital and 2025 population (World Bank) of Bangladesh and of Sri Lanka.

 Answer

Bangladesh: Dhaka, 175,686,899 (about 176 million). Sri Lanka: Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte (legislative) and Colombo (commercial), 21,756,000 (about 22 million).

2. When did the Sri Lankan Civil War begin and end, and what range of deaths did the UN estimate soon after it ended?

 Answer

It ran from 1983 to May 2009. The UN estimated 80,000 to 100,000 people killed over the whole conflict.

Understand

1. Explain why floods in Bangladesh can be both harmful and helpful.

 Answer

Big floods destroy homes, crops and lives, but normal floods water the fields and leave fresh silt that keeps delta soil fertile for rice, jute and fish.

2. Explain how the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 contributed to tensions that led to the civil war.

Answer

It made Sinhala the only official language and left out Tamil, so many Tamils felt shut out of government jobs, schools and courts. It became a symbol of discrimination that fed the demand for a separate Tamil state.

Apply

1. Use the Delta and Island MicroSim. Press **Average year** and **Extreme year (1998)**. Name two places on the delta that stay dry in an average year and one that floods. Then explain where you would build a cyclone shelter and why. *Hint: look at the hills, the rivers and the coast.*
2. Your club is planning a joint Pohela Boishakh and Sinhala and Tamil New Year event in April. Using the chapter, write a short announcement that explains to non-South Asian students why both new years fall in the same week. *Hint: think about the sun and spring calendars.*

Analyze

1. Compare the role of language in Ekushey February (Bangladesh) and the Sinhala Only Act (Sri Lanka). What is similar about how language policy affected each country? *Hint: in both cases, a government chose one language for everyone.*
2. Analyze why the Garment Industry and Microfinance both matter especially for women in Bangladesh, and what risks each carries. *Hint: think about wages, safety, loans and debt.*

Evaluate

1. The "Whose Story?" box shows that Sri Lankans remember May 2009 very differently. Evaluate how a textbook, a museum or a memorial could fairly present the end of the war. What would you include, and what would you avoid? *Hint: consider Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim families, and the UN's ranges.*
2. Some people say "Made in Bangladesh" labels mean we should stop buying clothes from Bangladesh; others say that would hurt the workers. Evaluate both views using evidence from the chapter. *Hint: think about the jobs the industry creates and the lessons of Rana Plaza.*

Create

1. Design a one-page "Delta and Island" travel guide for a student visiting both countries. Include one natural wonder, one historic site and one food or drink from each, using places from this chapter. *Hint: the Sundarbans, Anuradhapura, Sri Pada and Ceylon tea are good starting points.*
2. Write a short diary entry (150 to 200 words) from a student in Dhaka on 21 February, walking to the Shaheed Minar at dawn. Describe what they see and why the day matters to them. *Hint: use the facts from Section 19.6, and do not invent a real person's words.*

Key Takeaways

- Bangladesh, the People's Republic of Bangladesh, became independent in 1971; its capital is Dhaka and it had 175,686,899 people in 2025 (World Bank).
- Most of Bangladesh sits on the Bengal Delta, the world's largest, where the Padma, Jamuna and Meghna meet; about 21% of the country floods

in an average year, and floods bring both danger and fertile silt.

- The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, protects the coast and shelters Bengal tigers; Ekushey February (21 February 1952) is now International Mother Language Day.
- Garments make up more than four-fifths of Bangladesh's exports, and Grameen Bank's microfinance won the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize; since February 2026, Tarique Rahman has been prime minister.
- Sri Lanka (Ceylon until 1972) is an island of 21,756,000 people (2025, World Bank), mostly Sinhala-speaking Buddhists, with large Tamil, Muslim and Christian communities; Colombo is its commercial capital and Anuradhapura its ancient one.
- The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983 to 2009) was mainly about ethnicity, language and power; the UN estimated 80,000 to 100,000 deaths, and families remember it in very different ways.
- Ceylon tea and Sri Pada show the island's layered history; after the 2022 crisis, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has led Sri Lanka since September 2024.

You crossed the Bay of Bengal!



You can now explain why Bangladesh lives with its rivers, why Sri Lanka's history climbs into the hills, and why Zara and Dilan both celebrate New Year in April. Next, in Chapter 20, we head up into the Himalaya and out to the coral atolls: Nepal, Bhutan and the Maldives.

Quiz: Bangladesh and Sri Lanka

Test your understanding of Chapter 19. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

Which three rivers meet to form the Bengal Delta?

- A. The Indus, the Ganges and the Yamuna
- B. The Mekong, the Brahmaputra and the Irrawaddy
- C. The Ganges, the Brahmaputra and the Meghna
- D. The Padma, the Indus and the Kaveri

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. The Ganges (called the Padma in Bangladesh), the Brahmaputra (called the Jamuna) and the Meghna meet and flow into the Bay of Bengal. The Indus flows through Pakistan to the Arabian Sea, far to the west.

Concept Tested: Bengal Delta **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

What does Ekushey February commemorate?

- A. Students killed in Dhaka on 21 February 1952 while protesting for Bangla as a state language
- B. The day Bangladesh declared independence in 1971
- C. The founding of Grameen Bank
- D. The first Bengali New Year parade in Dhaka

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. On 21 February 1952, police fired on students protesting for Bangla. The day is now Language Martyrs' Day in Bangladesh and, since 1999, UNESCO's International Mother Language Day. Independence was declared on 26 March 1971, a different date.

Concept Tested: Ekushey February **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

When did the Sri Lankan Civil War take place?

- A. 1948 to 1972
- B. 1971 to 1983
- C. 1990 to 2002
- D. 1983 to 2009

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. The war began in 1983 and ended in May 2009 with the military defeat of the LTTE. 1948 is the year of independence and 1972 the year Ceylon became Sri Lanka. In 2002 a ceasefire was signed, but it later broke down.

Concept Tested: Sri Lankan Civil War **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

Why can monsoon floods in Bangladesh be helpful as well as harmful?

- A. Because floods only happen in the desert parts of the country
- B. Because normal floods water the fields and leave fresh silt that keeps the soil fertile
- C. Because all of the flood water comes from rain inside Bangladesh
- D. Because floods stop the rivers from carrying mud

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **B**. A normal flood soaks the fields and deposits silt for rice, jute and fish, while extreme floods destroy homes and crops. Option C is a common mistake: most of the river water comes from outside Bangladesh.

Concept Tested: Rivers and Floods **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Which statement best explains how Ceylon tea came to Sri Lanka?

- A. British planters introduced it as a crop in 1867 and expanded it after coffee leaf rust destroyed the coffee plantations.
- B. Tea has grown wild on the island's mountains for thousands of years.
- C. Buddhist monks brought it from Anuradhapura in the 200s BCE.
- D. It was first planted by the Portuguese in Galle.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Tea is not native. James Taylor began growing it commercially in 1867, and it spread after coffee leaf rust struck from 1869. The plantations depended on workers brought from South India.

Concept Tested: Ceylon Tea **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Which description fits the Sinhala Language?

- A. A Dravidian language closely related to Tamil
- B. A dialect of Hindi brought by the British
- C. An Indo-Aryan language with its own script, most closely related to Dhivehi of the Maldives
- D. A language spoken mainly in the Jaffna Peninsula

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Sinhala is Indo-Aryan, written in its own rounded script, and its closest relative is Dhivehi. Tamil, not Sinhala, is the Dravidian language spoken mainly in the north, including Jaffna.

Concept Tested: Sinhala Language **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

A classmate asks whether Sri Lanka is "just a part of India." Which answer is best?

- A. Yes, Sri Lanka is an Indian state in the Indian Ocean.
- B. No. Sri Lanka is an independent island country, independent since 1948, with its own government, languages and currency, across the narrow Palk Strait from India.
- C. Yes, but it has its own flag.
- D. No, Sri Lanka is part of the Maldives.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Sri Lanka became independent on 4 February 1948 (as Ceylon) and has always been a separate country from India, though the two are close neighbors with shared history.

Concept Tested: Sri Lanka **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

Using the Delta and Island MicroSim, you press **Average year**. Which result matches the chapter?

- A. The whole country floods, including the eastern hills.
- B. Nothing floods, because floods only happen in extreme years.
- C. Only the Sundarbans floods.
- D. About a fifth of the land floods, mostly along the rivers and toward the coast, while higher ground stays dry.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. In an average year about 21% of Bangladesh floods, and the lowest land near the rivers and coast floods first. The sim's land heights are illustrative, but the preset matches the documented average.

Concept Tested: Rivers and Floods **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

Both Ekushey February and the Sinhala Only Act involve language policy. What is the most important similarity?

- A. In both, a government favored one language, and speakers of another language felt shut out, which fed political movements.
- B. In both, English was made the only official language.
- C. In both, the protests happened in the same year.
- D. In both, the language being promoted was Tamil.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Pakistan's push for Urdu alone angered Bangla speakers and fed the movement that led to independence. Sri Lanka's 1956 act made Sinhala the only official language and became a grievance for Tamils that fed the conflict. The events were in 1952 and 1956, not the same year.

Concept Tested: Sinhala Language **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

Why is it misleading to call the Sri Lankan Civil War a religious war?

- A. Because no one in Sri Lanka practices a religion
- B. Because all Tamils and all Sinhalese share the same religion
- C. Because the conflict was mainly about ethnicity, language, power and land, and the LTTE sought a Tamil homeland, not a Hindu one
- D. Because the war was fought only by foreign armies

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **C**. Most Sinhalese are Buddhist and most Tamils are Hindu, so religion overlapped with identity, but the fight was over a separate Tamil state, political power and language rights, and there were Christians on both sides.

Concept Tested: Sri Lankan Tamils **Bloom's Level:** Analyze