The Cultural Geography of South Asia
Chapter Objectives

- Describe South Asia’s population profile, density, and distribution.
- Identify key developments in the history of the region and its countries’ governments.
- Discuss the role of religion, education, health care, and the arts in South Asia.
Objectives

• Explain how the peoples of South Asia reflect diversity.
• Describe how South Asia’s large population is distributed.
• Discuss how life in the region’s cities compares with life in traditional rural villages.
Terms to Know

- Jati
- Megalopolis
A Geographic View

Hindu temple near the Brahmaputra, India
South Asia is the location of 5 of the world’s 13 largest cities: Mumbai, Kolkata, and Delhi, India; Dhaka, Bangladesh; and Karachi, Pakistan. Each is home to between 11 and 18 million people. Experts predict that by 2015, each of these cities will have to find room for an additional 5 million people.
Over 1.3 billion people—more than one-fifth of the world’s population—live in South Asia. The people of the region speak hundreds of languages and practice several major religions.
Human Characteristics

• **India**  Most of India’s population is descended from the Dravidians, who have lived in the area for 8,000 years, and the Aryans, who invaded from Central Asia more than 3,000 years ago.

• Many Indians identify themselves by their religions—as Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, and Christians.

• **Pakistan and Bangladesh**  Most of the people of Pakistan and Bangladesh practice Islam.

• Pakistanis belong to one of five major ethnic groups.

• Most of the people of Bangladesh are Bengali.
Human Characteristics

• Sri Lanka’s Sinhalese and Tamils In Sri Lanka, the Buddhist Sinhalese are the majority and form the government.

• The other group—Hindu Tamils—have been fighting for an independent state in northern Sri Lanka since the 1980s.

• This conflict has resulted in thousands of deaths and has disrupted the country’s economy.

• Bhutan and Nepal The Bhote and Tibetan people of Bhutan and the various ethnic groups of Nepal are descended from Mongolians.
Population Density and Distribution

- With 772 people per square mile (298 people per sq. km), South Asia’s population density is almost seven times the world average. At present rates, South Asia will nearly double its current population by the year 2050.
Population Density and Distribution
Population Density and Distribution

- **Regional Variation**
  - Most people in the region live in agricultural areas, such as on the Ganges Plain or along the coasts.
  - Desert and mountain areas are sparsely populated.
  - Maldives is the world’s most crowded country, with over 2,400 people per square mile.

- **Bangladesh Slows Its Growth** Bangladesh, the second most populated country in South Asia, has difficulty feeding its population.
  - Private and government programs have been set up to encourage women to have fewer children and become involved in business.
  - The number of children per woman decreased from 4 to 2.8 in the 1990s.
Urban and Rural Life

• Most of South Asia’s population is rural. Even in Pakistan, South Asia’s most urbanized country, two-thirds of the population lives in rural areas.

• **Rural Life** Rural life in South Asia has changed little over hundreds of years.

• People farm, live in villages, and struggle to grow enough crops to feed their families.

• South Asia is also home to nomadic groups that herd camels, goats, or yaks for a living.

• **Growing Urbanization** In recent years, many South Asians have moved to cities, drawn by the hope of better jobs.

• The resulting overpopulation causes shortages in housing, health care, and educational facilities, as well as serious pollution.
Urban and Rural Life
Urban and Rural Life

- **South Asia’s Cities**  South Asian cities are among the world’s most densely populated urban areas.

- Important cities in the region include Mumbai (Bombay), Kolkata (Calcutta), Delhi, Dhaka, and Karachi.

- Mumbai, India’s main port on the Arabian Sea as well as its largest city, has a population of more than 15 million.
Urban and Rural Life
Objectives

- Explain where South Asia’s first civilization developed.
- Name the two major world religions that originated in South Asia.
- Examine how invasions and conquests shaped South Asia.
- Discuss what types of challenges South Asian countries face today.
Terms to Know

- Dharma
- Reincarnation
- Karma
- Nirvana
- Raj
A Geographic View

Badshahi Mosque, Lahore
The British East India Company began acquiring political control over India during the late 1700s. By the 1830s, the company’s control extended over much of the subcontinent. In 1857, the sepoys, or Indian soldiers in the army of the British East India Company, mutinied. It took British forces over a year to crush their revolt. With British victory over the sepoys, the British government in London took control of India from the company. British authorities ruled directly in coastal areas, major river valleys, and strategic frontier regions. In the less accessible interior, Indian princes still ruled, with advice and consent from the British.
Early Climates

The earliest South Asians left few written records, but evidence of their achievements in building and trade have been discovered in modern times.
Early History

- The Indus Valley Civilization The Indus Valley civilization arose around 2500 B.C.
- This culture developed a writing system, a strong central government, and a thriving overseas trade.
- People built what may have been the world’s first cities.
- The buildings were made of brick and had sophisticated plumbing.
- This civilization declined around 1600 B.C., probably because of changes in the environment.
Early History
Early History

- **The Aryans** After the decline of the Indus Valley civilization, hunters and herders called Aryans came from the northwest to settle in the subcontinent.

- Aryan society consisted of four groups: priests, warriors (or nobles), artisans and farmers, and enslaved people.

- Over the centuries, this ranking system developed into a complex system of classes, or castes, that dictated from birth a person’s social status.
Two Great Religions

- Hinduism and Buddhism have had a profound influence on South Asia.

- **Hinduism** Hinduism, which grew out of Aryan culture and religion, expects everyone to recognize and carry out his or her *dharna*, or moral duty.

- Hindus believe in *reincarnation* until the soul achieves perfection.

- Good deeds help a person achieve perfection; evil deeds tie one to the endless wheel of rebirth.

- Hindus worship many gods and goddesses, which are often seen as different forms of one eternal being.
Two Great Religions

- **Buddhism** Buddhism is based on the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama, who during the 500s B.C. left his family and riches to seek the true nature of human existence.

- Known as the Buddha, or Awakened One, Siddhartha urged people to achieve contentment by working diligently, thinking clearly, showing compassion, and avoiding attachment to material things.
Two Great Religions
Two Great Religions

- **A Marriage of Influences** Buddhism eventually spread from India to other countries.
- In some places, new forms of Buddhism blended with local practices.
Invasions and Empires

- After the Aryans, other groups invaded South Asia through the Khyber Pass, establishing new empires and civilizations.
- The Mauryan Empire ruled most of the subcontinent from about 320 to 180 B.C.
- The Gupta Empire came to power around A.D. 320.
- Under this Hindu civilization, technology and the arts flourished.
- Arabic numerals were probably developed in Gupta India and introduced to Europe by Arab traders.
- By the 1100s, Muslim forces had conquered northern India.
Invasions and Empires

- The Muslim-led Mogul Empire dominated the subcontinent for centuries, converting many South Asians to Islam.

- Beginning around 1500, Europeans arrived in the region by sea.

- In the late 1700s, the British became the major European power in South Asia.

- They referred to their Indian empire as the raj, the Hindi word for empire.

- The British restructured the school system, introduced the English language, built railroads, and developed a civil service.
Modern South Asia

- **Independence**
  - Mohandas K. Gandhi inspired Indians to protest British rule by nonviolent means.
  - He worked to end the rigid social system.
  - He became known as Mahatma, or “Great Soul.”
  - British India gained its independence in 1947 but was divided along religious lines.
  - Areas with a Hindu majority became India.
  - Those with a Muslim majority became Pakistan, which was separated into two sections—East Pakistan and West Pakistan—by about 1,000 miles (1,609 km) of land belonging to India.
  - In 1948 Ceylon gained its independence from Britain, and in 1972 it began using its ancient name—Sri Lanka.
  - In 1971, East Pakistan revolted against West Pakistan and became the new country of Bangladesh.
  - The western part retained the name Pakistan.
Modern South Asia
Modern South Asia

- **Regional Conflicts** Since independence, India and Pakistan have fought over the disputed province of Kashmir.
- Today, both countries have nuclear weapons.
- Since the 1980s, Sri Lanka has been torn by fighting between the Sinhalese-led government and Tamil rebel forces.
- Sri Lanka has been on the brink of outright civil war since the 1980s.
Today’s Governments
- India, often called the world’s largest democracy, is a federal parliamentary republic.
- For 40 years after independence, members of the Nehru family headed India’s government.
- After political assassinations in 1984 and 1991, the country settled into relative stability.
- Pakistan is a parliamentary republic that has endured many years of military rule.
- Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are parliamentary republics, where intense political or ethnic rivalries have made stable government difficult.
- Nepal and Bhutan are ruled by monarchies that are trying to modernize and still keep some power.
Culture and Lifestyles

Section 3
Objectives

• Identify ways the region’s linguistic and religious diversity is reflected in the lives of South Asia’s peoples.
• Describe South Asia’s contributions to the arts.
• List ways South Asian counties are meeting challenges to improve the quality of life of the region’s people.
• Point out how distinctive celebrations reflect the rich cultural diversity of South Asia.
Terms to Know

- Guru
- mantra
- sadhu
- stupa
- dzong
A Geographic View
The Mahabharata, written in about 400 B.C., is a poem of about 222,000 lines—seven times longer than the Greek epics of the Iliad and Odyssey put together. While each of the Greek epics tells one connected story, the Mahabharata is a collection of many closely related tales. The Bhagavad Gita, one section of the Mahabharata, stresses the importance of performing one’s moral duties in the hope of achieving spiritual perfection.
Languages

- The people of South Asia speak 19 major languages and hundreds of local dialects.

- **Indo-European Languages** Indo-European languages are the most common in the region.
  - About half of all Indians speak Hindi.
  - Urdu is the official language of Pakistan, and Bengali is the official language of Bangladesh.
  - Sanskrit, the ancient language of the Aryans, is still used for religious, literary, and musical purposes.

- **Other Languages** About 20 percent of the people in southern India and Sri Lanka speak Dravidian languages, whose roots go back to the region’s earliest inhabitants.
Religions

- Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism are the major religions of South Asia.
- In addition, some 20 million followers of Sikhism live in northwestern India.
- Christianity is concentrated in urban areas in southern and northeastern India.

**Religion and Daily Life**  Religion affects diet, daily activities, and dress in South Asia.
- Many religious groups also have some influence on the political process.
The Arts

- **Literature** The South Asian literary tradition has its roots in religion.
- Its two chief religious epics are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, both composed between 1500 and 500 B.C.
The Arts

- **Dance and Music**  Dance and musical performance have long traditions in India.
  - Dance styles are based on the movements of ancient temple dancers.
  - Melodies of classical music are called *ragas*, and rhythms are called *talas*.

- **Movies**  Mumbai is home to the world’s busiest and most productive film industry, releasing more than 800 films every year.
Quality of Life

• **Health**  Life expectancies in South Asia are generally lower than in most industrialized countries.
• The scarcity of clean water encourages the spread of diseases such as cholera and dysentery.
• AIDS is also a major health concern.
• **Education**  South Asian governments are working to raise literacy rates and extend educational opportunities to women and members of lower social classes.
The Arts

- **Visual Arts and Architecture**  South Asia’s sculpture and temple architecture express religious beliefs.
- The beautiful Taj Mahal in Agra, a monument to a Muslim emperor’s wife, is one of the world’s most famous buildings.
- Modern South Asian architecture blends traditional and Western styles.
Quality of Life

- **Food** Despite improved farming techniques and government efforts, many South Asians are too poor to buy high-quality protein foods.
- To obtain needed protein, some people eat soy-based tofu or beans.
- Religious dietary regulations keep Hindus from eating beef and Muslims from eating pork.
- Jains and many Buddhists are vegetarians.
Celebrations

- South Asians celebrate a variety of traditional holidays based on some form of religion. The region’s different countries also commemorate national holidays.
Summary – Section 1

- The population of South Asia reflects a rich and complex mix of religions, languages, and social groupings.
- South Asia has a high overall population density, but population distribution varies from region to region according to climate and terrain.
- There is a sharp contrast between urban and rural life in South Asia.
Summary – Section 2

- One of the world’s first civilizations developed in the Indus River valley.
- South Asia gave birth to two of the world’s major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism.
- South Asia was shaped by a series of invasions and conquests, including the expansion of the British Empire into the region.
- South Asian countries today face the challenges of independence and establishing new governments.
- Several South Asian countries have had female leaders after becoming independent.
South Asia is a land of many languages and religions.
The diverse cultures of South Asia have made rich contributions to the arts.
South Asia faces the challenge of improving the quality of life for much of its population.
Even with the challenges it faces, South Asia benefits from its cultural diversity.