The Geography of the Indian Subcontinent

South Asia — modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh — is a subcontinent. It lies below the rest of Asia, and is separated by tall mountains. Just below the mountains are two large plains that hold the Ganges and Indus rivers. The high mountains (Himalayas) gave the people safety from invaders, yet made travel difficult. But because they lived close to the sea, the people could travel over the water to trade with other peoples.

The people along the Indus River (western part of India) faced many of the same challenges that the people in Mesopotamia did. Their river flooded each year and left soil good for farming, but the floods did not occur at the same time each year and the river sometimes changed its course.

The region’s weather caused problems, too. Each fall or winter, strong winds blew cool dry air across the area. Each spring or summer, the winds brought heavy rains. These seasonal winds are called monsoons.

The Monsoons:
How did monsoons affect Indian climate?

In about the middle of June, winds shift and blow from the southwest. These winds carry humid, moist air from the Arabian Sea across the subcontinent. This air hits the Himalaya Mountains in the northeast of India, and is forced upward, where it cools and condenses and turns to rain. The Ganges river valley, located in northeastern India receives more than 120 inches of rainfall annually. (Compare that to an average of 32 inches in Rochester, NY, or 36 inches in Seattle WA...)

The arrival of the rainfall is welcomed by farmers in India, and it is essential to the survival of their crops. What is difficult for the farmers to predict is the exact timing of the wet monsoon’s arrival. Farmers need to try to time their growing season appropriately, so that their crops are well established by the time the monsoons arrive. If the plants are still seedlings, or are immature, they may be washed away by the rain of the monsoons. If the arrival of the monsoons is later than expected, crops may wither and die from drought. As in all things, timing is everything.

In about October, the winds shift and begin to blow from the northeast. Cool, dry air sweeps down from the Himalaya Mountains, across the subcontinent and out to the Arabian Sea. This winter monsoon provides relief for the countries scorched by summer temperatures.

The Himalayas:
How did the mountains affect India?

Towering, snow-covered mountain ranges arc across the northern border of the subcontinent, including the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas. These mountains limited contacts between India and other lands and helped its people develop a distinct culture. Yet mountains were not a complete barrier. Steep passages through the Hindu Kush served as gateways to migrating and invading peoples for thousands of years.

The first city on the Indus Harappa

Historians cannot understand the writings of the people who settled in the Indus Valley. So, they have not learned much about these people. They do know that they were farming along the river about 3200 BCE. The culture is called Harappan civilization because many discoveries were made near the city of Harappa. They also know that the culture of these people covered an area larger than either Mesopotamia or Egypt.

About 2500 BCE, these people began building their first cities. In Mesopotamia, cities were a jumble of winding streets. In the Indus Valley, however, the
Builders carefully planned their cities. They made a grid of streets. They built an area called a citadel that was easy to defend. All the important buildings were here. They also had systems for carrying water and sewage.

Because the houses were mostly alike, scholars think that the Indus culture did not have big differences between social classes.

These early people left an important mark on the region. Some religious objects include symbols that became part of later Indian culture. Historians also think that the people of the area had extensive trade with people in the region and with the people of Mesopotamia.

**Mysterious End to Indus Valley Culture**

Around 1750 BCE, the cities of the Indus began to show signs of decline. The Indus Valley civilization collapsed around 1500 BCE. Satellite images suggest a shift in the earth's crust that caused earthquakes. Because of the quakes, the Indus River may have changed its course. This would stop the good effects of the yearly floods. The people may have overworked the land. This would have left the soil too poor to produce crops. Eventually, this area was invaded by a nomadic people from the north known as the Aryans. Whether they caused the collapse of the Harappan civilization, or followed after, is not known.

Draw a picture of the how the summer monsoon winds affects India.
**Directions:** In the table below, describe how each of the following geographic features had an effect on the people of India.

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<th>Geographic Feature</th>
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**Thought question:** What made ancient India different from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia?