“Abode of Snow”—this is what the word “Himalaya” means in the language called Sanskrit. The Himalaya region is a world of amazingly tall mountain peaks. They lie in a broad east-west band that twists across the region of southern Asia. Among the peaks is Mt. Everest. This is the highest mountain in the world. Mt. Everest stands 8,850 meters above sea level. The north half of the mountain is in Tibet, a region in southwestern China. The south half of the mountain is in the country of Nepal. The Himalaya mountain range contains many mountains almost as tall as Mt. Everest.

The valleys in the Himalaya mountain range are very deep. Some are over 3,000 meters deep. People live in the lower valleys. A few people live in the valleys that are part way up the mountains, but almost no one lives in the icy world at the highest areas. It is very cold there. The temperature is usually below –10°C. How far below freezing is that? At the tops of the peaks, it can be as cold as –38°C. Here winds blow almost all the time, sometimes at speeds of 150 km/hr. In April and May, the winds calm down a little. This is the time of year when some people try to climb the high peaks. It is very dangerous. Storms can come very quickly. This view of the Himalayas is from the south looking toward the north. It is a photograph taken from a satellite in space. The brown area to the north is a very high plateau. A plateau is a high, flat area of land. This plateau is called the Tibetan Plateau. The climate is dry on the plateau. There are lakes on the plateau, but the water in many of them is salty. North of the plateau is a huge desert. Do you see it?

South of the plateau, the Himalaya Mountains form a very high ridge. The ridge appears white in this picture because it is covered with snow and ice. There are many mountain glaciers here. This mountain ridge lies between the dry plateau and the wetter area to the south. India and most of Nepal lie in this wetter southern region. The area south of the ridge is also fairly flat. This type of land is called a plain. Clouds bring rain across the plains during the summer months. It rains and rains and rains. These heavy rains are called monsoons. The clouds can rarely carry water over the ridge of mountains. Instead, the water falls as rain on the plains and on the southern side of the mountain range. The range is a divide between the dry areas to the north and the wet areas to the south.
This region is an area of great contrasts. The dry Tibetan Plateau and the desert to the north are very different from the wet plains and the wet southern slopes of the mountains. On the wet side of the Himalayas, plants called giant rhododendrons grow at very high altitudes. Animals called yaks live at very high altitudes on the other, dry side of the Himalayas. They are ridden by people or used to carry heavy loads. Lower on the slopes are forests of conifers, plants such as pine trees. The monsoon climate makes the south side of the mountains and the southern foothills very wet, with many different kinds of plants. Here is a map that shows the boundaries of countries and the location of the Himalaya Mountains and the desert in China. This map covers about the same area as the satellite photo.