

Developments in South and Southeast Asia

*What the books taught me, I've practised.
What they didn't teach me, I've taught myself.
I've gone into the forest and wrestled with the lion.
I didn't get this far by teaching one thing and doing another.*

— Lal Ded (1320–1392)

Essential Question: How did various beliefs and practices in South and Southeast Asia affect society and the development of states?

The poetry of Lal Ded, known as Mother Lalla, illustrates a major cross-interaction between religious traditions that shaped the history of South and Southern Asia. She was born in Kashmir, a region of northern India. While a Hindu, her emphasis on experience appealed to many Muslims, particularly Sufis. The interaction of Hindus and Muslims, though sometimes violent, created dynamic developments in religious thought, politics, economics, art, and architecture. Despite the strong Islamic presence in the region, local Hindu kingdoms continued to play a major role in India's decentralized political landscape. A third religion, Buddhism, also had a strong presence in the area, particularly in the Sinhala dynasties in present-day Sri Lanka and the great kingdoms of Southeast Asia.

Political Structures in South Asia

South Asia was only occasionally united as a single state in its history. After the Gupta Dynasty that had dominated South Asia collapsed in 550, ending the so-called Golden Age or Classical Era of Indian history, disunity returned to the region for most of the next 1,000 years. Northern and southern India developed separate political structures. However, Hinduism provided some cultural unity throughout the region. Many people combined their own local faith tradition with adherence to the same scriptures and core beliefs respected throughout the region.

Political Structures in Southern India Southern India was more stable than northern India. The first kingdom, the Chola Dynasty, reigned over southern India for more than 400 years (850–1267). During the 11th century,

the dynasty extended its rule to Ceylon, the large island just south of India. (Today it is known as Sri Lanka.)

The second kingdom, the **Vijayanagara Empire** (1336–1646) took its name from the word for “the victorious city.” It began with the arrival of two brothers, Harihara and Bukka, from the Delhi Sultanate in north-central India. They were sent to the area because the Delhi Sultanate wished to extend its rule to southern India. These brothers had been born as Hindus and converted to Islam for the sake of upward mobility. When they left the region controlled by the Delhi Sultanate, they once again embraced the religion of their birth and established their own Hindu kingdom. The Vijayanagar Empire existed from the mid-1300s until the mid-1500s, when a group of Muslim kingdoms overthrew it.

Political Structures in Northern India Northern India experienced a great deal more upheaval than did southern India. After the fall of the Gupta Empire (see Prologue), the **Rajput kingdoms** gradually formed in northern India and present-day Pakistan. These were Hindu kingdoms led by leaders of numerous clans who were often at war with one another. Because of the competition among clans, no centralized government arose, once again demonstrating the diversity and the regionalism of South Asia. The lack of a centralized power left the kingdoms vulnerable to Muslim attacks.

While the Himalayas protected India from invasions from the north and east, mountain passes in the northwest allowed invasions by Muslim armies. Each attack disrupted a region that had been mostly Hindu and Buddhist. Over time, the Islamic presence in the region grew:

- In the 8th century, Islamic armies invaded what is today Pakistan. However, they brought little change to everyday life. Located on the eastern fringes of the Dar al-Islam, the region was isolated from the center of the culture. In addition, the Rajput princes skillfully wielded their power to limit the Muslim conquerors’ influence.
- In the 11th century, Islamic forces plundered northern India’s Hindu temples and Buddhist shrines for their riches. In addition, they erected mosques on Hindu and Buddhist holy sites—much to the anger of the followers of those faiths.

In the early 13th century, Islamic forces managed to conquer the city of Delhi and much of the northern portion of South Asia. Bringing Islam into India, the **Delhi Sultanate** reigned for 300 years, from the 13th through the 16th centuries. The interaction of Islam and Hinduism in northern India dominated the political history of the era. While some Hindus converted to Islam, others resented Muslims and considered them foreigners. One factor contributing to this resentment was that the Delhi Sultanate imposed a tax, called the *jizya*, on all non-Muslim subjects of the empire.

Throughout its reign, the Delhi Sultanate never organized an efficient bureaucracy in the style of the Chinese. For this reason, sultans had difficulty imposing their policies in a land as vast and diverse as India. Despite the strong

Islamic presence in the region, local kingdoms continued to play a major role in India's decentralized political landscape.

The sultans wanted to extend their rule southward. Before they succeeded, though, they became focused on defending themselves from an onslaught by the Mongol army from the northwest. The Delhi Sultanate prevented the Mongols themselves from conquering South Asia. However, in 1526, the sultans lost power to a new empire, the Mughals, whose leaders did trace their ancestry to the Mongols.

Religion in South Asia

Religion always held a dominant place in South Asian history. Before the arrival of Islam, most South Asians practiced Hinduism, while a smaller number identified themselves as Buddhists. South Asians encountered a starkly different religion when Islam arrived.

- Hindus pray to many gods, while Islam is strictly monotheistic.
- Hindu temples and artwork are replete with pictures of deities, while Muslims disapprove of any visual representation of Allah.
- Hinduism was associated with a hierarchical caste system, while Islam has always called for the equality of all believers.
- Hindus recognize several sacred texts, while Muslims look to only the Quran for spiritual guidance.

The Arrival of Islam The relationship between Hindus and Muslims shaped the history of South Asia beginning in the 7th century, and it continues to shape regional culture and politics today. Islam initially entered India forcefully yet eventually took on a more peaceful approach. But while Islam was a universalizing religion, one that wanted to **proselytize**, or actively seek converts, Muslim rulers found early in their reign that forcing their Hindu and Buddhist subjects to convert was not successful. Thus, most converts came to Islam voluntarily. Many Muslim merchants in the Indian Ocean trade moved to Indian port cities and married. Their wives often ended up converting to their husband's religion.

With its emphasis on the equality of all believers, Islam also attracted low-caste Hindus who hoped that conversion would improve their social status. In this sense, Islam in India was like Christianity in the Roman Empire. Both appealed to the people who suffered the most under the existing social structure.

The largest numbers of converts to Islam, however, were Buddhists. Corruption among the monks and raids on monasteries by early Muslim conquerors left the Buddhist religion disorganized. The spread of Islam helped make Buddhism a minority religion in its place of birth. (Connect: Make an outline comparing the spread of Islam in South Asia to the spread of Buddhism in China. See Topic 1.1.)

Social Structures in South Asia

The arrival of Islam did little to alter the basic structure of society in South Asia. India's caste system is its strongest historical continuity. While obviously inequitable, it lent stability to a politically decentralized land. The caste system was flexible and able to accommodate newcomers. Muslim merchants and migrants, even though they were not Hindu, found a place for themselves within the caste hierarchy based on their occupation. These subcastes based on occupation operated like workers' guilds, soon becoming absorbed into the social fabric of Indian society. **Connect: Write a paragraph comparing the caste system in South Asia to the social structures in China in the period from 1200 to 1450. See Topic 1.1.)**

At the same time, most of those who tried to escape the grip of the caste system failed. The low-caste Hindus who converted to Islam as a way to improve their social status usually did not achieve that goal. Individuals required more education and opportunities for better jobs, not just a new religion, to help them escape their low status in life.

As Islam spread, Muslims varied how they applied its core teachings, depending on their culture before converting. For example, Islam did not alter gender relations greatly. In South Asia, women in the Hindu tradition were confined to a separate social sphere, and Islamic women received similar treatment. In Southeast Asia, women enjoyed more independence before the arrival of Islam. This pattern continued as people became Muslims. Thus, converts in South and Southeast Asia found ways to accommodate a new faith, but most people did not reject their traditions in the process.

Cultural Interactions in South Asia

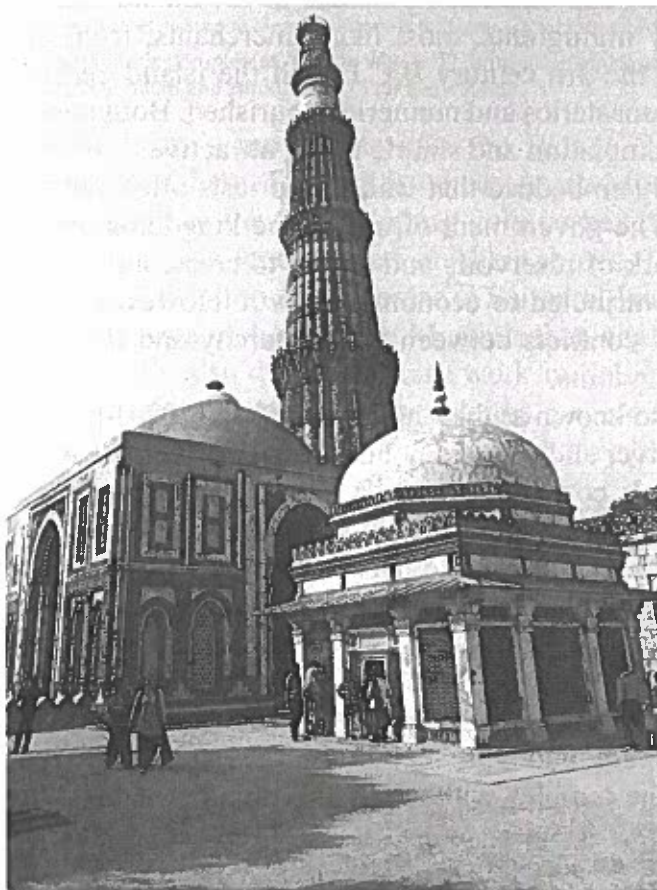
People in South Asia and the Middle East shared their intellectual and cultural achievements with each other. For example, Arab astronomers and mathematicians added to the body of knowledge begun by their Indian counterparts. Indian developments in algebra and geometry were translated into Arabic, and spread throughout Dar al-Islam. One result of this movement of ideas was that the numeral system referred to in the West as "Arabic numerals," actually originated in India.

In India itself, sultans erected buildings melding the intricate artistic details of Hindu art with the geometric patterns preferred by Islamic architecture. The city of Delhi is filled with examples of Islamic architecture built during the Delhi Sultanate. One famous example, the **Qutub Minar**, stands in the southern part of the city. Rulers from the Delhi Sultanate built an elaborate mosque on top of a Hindu temple and used materials for the mosque from nearby Hindu and other religious shrines. Towering over the mosque is the Qutub Minar itself, a gigantic leaning tower, the tallest structure in India today. Historians debate the reason for its construction; one obvious function is its presence as a symbol of Islamic influence and, at one time, dominance of northern India.

An entirely new language developed among Muslims of South Asia: **Urdu**. Urdu melded the grammatical pattern of Hindi (the language of Northern Indians), and with the vocabulary of Arabic and some elements of Farsi (the language of Persians). Today, Urdu is the official language of Pakistan.

The Bhakti Movement Beginning in the 12th century, some Hindus began to draw upon traditional teachings about the importance of emotion in their spiritual life. Rather than emphasize studying texts or performing rituals, they focused on developing a strong attachment to a particular deity. This development, known as the **Bhakti Movement**, started in southern India. It was especially appealing to many believers because it did not discriminate against women or people of low social status. For example, one of the most famous figures of the Bhakti Movement would be a female, the poet Mira Bai, who lived in the 16th century.

Though the bhaktis were Hindus, they were similar in some ways to Sufi Muslims. Both groups were mystical movements, ones that emphasized inner reflection in order to achieve a direct personal relationship with a deity. Because they placed less emphasis on strict adherence to traditional rituals and beliefs, bhaktis and Sufis each appealed to people outside their traditions. Just as the Sufis helped spread Islam, the Bhaktis helped spread Hinduism.



Source: Thinkstock

Religious structures in India often demonstrate syncretism in architecture. Qutub Minar combines towers common in Hindu temples with domes common in Islamic mosques.

Southeast Asia

Like China, South Asia strongly influenced its neighbors, particularly the lands of Southeast Asia—today's Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Indian merchants had contact with these Southeast Asian lands as early as 500 B.C.E. The merchants sold gold, silver, metal goods, and textiles in the region and brought back its fine spices. Trade voyages introduced the Indian religions of Hinduism and Buddhism to Southeast Asia. Much of the region became and remains today mostly Buddhist. The region, like Southwest Asia, was strategically significant. Whoever controlled this region could influence the valuable trade between South Asia and East Asia.

Sea-Based Kingdoms Because Southeast Asia was so important, several kingdoms emerged there. Two were particularly long-lasting:

- The **Srivijaya Empire** (670–1025) was a Hindu kingdom based on Sumatra. It built up its navy and prospered by charging fees for ships traveling between India and China.
- The **Majapahit Kingdom** (1293–1520) based on Java had 98 tributaries at its height. Like Srivijaya, Majapahit sustained its power by controlling sea routes. Unlike Srivijaya, Majapahit was Buddhist.

Land-Based Kingdoms Other kingdoms in Southeast Asia drew power from their control over land. The **Sinhala dynasties** in Sri Lanka had their roots in the arrival of early immigrants, most likely merchants, from north India. Buddhists arrived in the 3rd century B.C.E. and the island became a center of Buddhist study. Monasteries and nunneries flourished. Both men and women found a life of contemplation and simple living attractive.

Buddhism was so deeply embedded that Buddhist priests often served as advisors to the monarchs. The government of one of the kingdoms oversaw the construction of a network of reservoirs and canals to create an excellent irrigation system, which contributed to economic growth. However, attacks by invaders from India and conflicts between the monarchy and the priests ultimately weakened the kingdoms.

The **Khmer Empire**, also known as the Angkor Kingdom (802–1431), was situated near the Mekong River and also did not depend on maritime prowess for its power. The kingdom's complex irrigation and drainage systems led to economic prosperity, making it one of the most prosperous kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Irrigation allowed farmers to harvest rice crops several times a year, and drainage systems reduced the impact of the heavy monsoon rains.

The Khmer capital was at Angkor Thom. The temples there showed the variety of Indian cultural influences on Southeast Asia. Hindu artwork and sculptures of deities abounded. But at some point the Khmer rulers became Buddhist. Starting in the 12th and 13th centuries, they added Buddhist sculptures and artwork to the temples without destroying any of the Hindu artwork.

During the same period and only one-half mile from Angkor Thom, rulers constructed the ornate and majestic Buddhist temple complex of Angkor Wat. In 1431, the Thais of the **Sukhothai Kingdom** invaded the area, forcing the Khmers out. Nevertheless, ruins of the magnificent structures in Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat still stand, testifying not only to the sophistication of Southeast Asian culture but also to the powerful influence of Indian culture on the region.



Source: Rajasthani Painting of Meenabai. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Meera_Bai#/media/File:Meenabai.jpg.

The great temple complex at Angkor Wat, in both its architecture and its use, reflects the interaction between Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia.

Islam Islam's movement into the Indian Ocean region paralleled its expansion elsewhere. The first Southeast Asian Muslims were local merchants, who converted in the 700s, hoping to have better trading relations with the Islamic merchants who arrived on their shores. Islam was most popular in urban areas at the time. Islam spread to Sumatra, Java, and the Malay Peninsula. Today, Indonesia includes more Muslims than any other country.

Sufis Sufis also did missionary work in Southeast Asia. (See Topic 1.2.) Because of their tolerance for local faiths, people felt comfortable converting to Islam. They could be Muslims and still honor local deities.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

GOVERNMENT: South Asia

Vijayanagara Empire
(Southern India)
Mughal kingdoms (North India)
Delhi Sultanate

GOVERNMENT: Southeast Asia

Srivijaya Empire (Sumatra)
Majapahit Kingdom (Java)
Sinhala dynasties (Sri Lanka)
Khmer Empire (Cambodia)
Sukhothai Kingdom (Thailand)

CULTURE: Religion proselytize Bhakti Movement

CULTURE: Blending
Qutub Minar
Urdu