EARLY SOUTHEAST ASIA

Between China and India lies the region that today is called Southeast Asia. It has two major components: a mainland region extending southward from the Chinese border down to the tip of the Malay peninsula and an extensive archipelago, most of which is part of present-day Indonesia and the Philippines.

Travel between the islands and regions to the west, north, and east was not difficult, so Southeast Asia has historically served as a vast land bridge for the movement of peoples between China, the Indian subcontinent, and the more than 25,000 islands of the South Pacific.

Although river valleys facilitated (made easier) made north-south travel on the Southeast Asian mainland, movement between east and west was relatively difficult. The mountains are densely forested and often infested with malaria-carrying mosquitoes. As a result, the lowland peoples in the river valleys were often isolated from each other and had only limited contacts with the upland peoples in the mountains. These geographical barriers may help explain why Southeast Asia is one of the few regions in Asia that was never unified under a single government.

Given Southeast Asia's location between China and India, it is not surprising that both Indian and Chinese civilizations influenced developments in the region. The Indian states never exerted much political control over Southeast Asia, but their influence was felt in other ways. By the first centuries C.E., Indian merchants were sailing to Southeast Asia, and they were soon followed - Buddhist and Hindu missionaries.

Indian influence can be seen in many aspects of Southeast Asian culture, from political institutions to religion, architecture, language, and literature.

Paddy Fields and Spices: The States of Southeast Asia

The traditional states of Southeast Asia can generally be divided between agricultural societies and trading societies. The distinction between farming and trade was a product of the environment.

The agricultural societies — notably, Vietnam, Angkor (in what is now Cambodia) and the state of Pagan (in modern-day Burma) were located in rich river deltas that allowed wet (paddy field) cultivation of rice. Although all three of these societies produced some goods for regional markets, none was tempted to turn to commerce as the prime source of livelihood. In fact, none was situated on or near the main trade routes that crisscrossed the region.

The islands of the Indonesian archipelago gave rise to two of the region's most notable trading societies. Both were based in large part on spices. As the wealth of the Arab empire in the Middle East and then of Western Europe increased, so did the demand for the products of East Asia. Merchant sailing fleets from India and the Arabian Peninsula sailed to the Indonesian islands to buy cloves, pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon, precious woods, and other exotic products highly desired by the wealthy. In the 700s, the communities located along the eastern coast of the island of Sumatra dominated the trade route passing through the Strait of Malacca, at that time the most convenient route from East Asia into the Indian Ocean.
The Influence of India

Indian influence was evident in all of these societies to various degrees. Based on models from the kingdoms of southern India, Southeast Asian kings were believed to possess special godlike qualities that set them apart from ordinary people. In some societies such as Angkor (in Cambodia) the most prominent royal advisers made up a brahmin class on the Indian model. In Pagan and Angkor, some division of the population into separate classes based on occupation and ethnic background occurred, although these divisions do not seem to have developed the rigidity of Indian castes.

India also supplied Southeast Asians with a writing system. The societies of the region had no written scripts for their spoken languages before the arrival of the Indian merchants and missionaries. Indian phonetic symbols were borrowed and used to record the spoken language. Initially, Southeast Asian literature was written in the Indian Sanskrit but eventually came to be written in the local languages. Southeast Asian authors borrowed popular Indian themes, such as stories from the Buddhist scriptures.

World of the Spirits: Religious Belief

Indian religions also had a profound effect on Southeast Asia. Traditional religious beliefs in the region took the familiar form of spirit worship and animism seen in other cultures. Southeast Asians believed that spirits dwelled in the mountains, rivers, streams, and other sacred places in their environment. Mountains were probably particularly sacred, since they were considered to be the home of ancestral spirits, the place to which the souls of all the departed would retire after death.

When Hindu and Buddhist ideas began to penetrate the area early in the first millennium C.E., they exerted a strong appeal among local elites. Not only did the new doctrines offer a more convincing explanation of the nature of the cosmos, but they also provided local rulers with a means of enhancing their prestige and power and conferred [an honor placed on] an aura [glow] of legitimacy on their relations with their subjects.
Answer questions ON A SEPARATE PIECE OF PAPER WITH YOUR NAME AND PERIOD ON IT.

1. Why was Southeast Asia never unified into one empire?
2. In what ways was Indian influence felt in Southeast Asia?
3. What are the two types of societies in Southeast Asia, and what generally determined what they would be?
4. How did Indian social organization, such as the caste system, influence Southeast Asia?
5. Why were mountains considered to be particularly sacred in Southeast Asian religious thought?
6. Why were many of the elite people in Southeast Asia drawn to Hindu and Buddhist teachings?
7. How did rulers in Southeast Asia use Buddhist and Hindu beliefs?