

## EPILOGUE

# THE LEGACY OF ANCIENT SOUTH ASIA

“ KALIDASA AND RAMAPRASAD

Today, the peoples of South Asia live in seven major countries: India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan. Each country has its history, customs, and habits of worship. Although many things have changed over time, one thing that remains as true today as in the past is that “the people are fond of festivity.” In India, most people are Hindu. They worship gods and goddesses such as Krishna, Shiva, and Kali. They believe that a person’s spirit doesn’t die, but is reborn into a new life. And, until recently, Indians believed that society should be divided into castes.

But not everyone in South Asia is Hindu. Some, like most Nepalis, are Buddhist. Some are Muslim. Muslims follow the teachings of the prophet Muhammad, who was born in an oasis town in Arabia in 570 CE. Muslims believe that when Muhammad was a young man, an angel appeared to him and told him that there was one god, Allah, and no other god but Allah. The angel emphasized that followers of Allah must never make any images of him, because they might worship

“ Kalidasa, *Shakuntala*, fifth–sixth century CE



*This image of the goddess Durga is made of bamboo, clay, and paper for the annual festival for the goddess. At the end of the celebration, it will be placed in the Ganga River to dissolve.*

A bearded musician plays a stringed instrument similar to the rabab, which is still played throughout Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. The robed woman plays the cymbals.

### WE REALLY MEAN WORLD MUSIC

One of South Asia's most popular musical instruments is called the sitar. It is based on the *veena*, a boat-shaped instrument that the goddess Saraswati plays, combined with instruments from Persia and the Middle East. The name comes from the Persian word *sehtar*—meaning “seven strings.” The modern sitar has 5 main melody strings, 2 rhythm strings, and 11 strings used for harmony. A musician plucks the strings with a *mizrab*, a wire pick worn on the tip of the index finger.

Ancient paintings show people playing the sitar during religious festivals. After the Muslims came to South Asia, the sitar became a popular instrument at the Mughal court. Over the last few decades, more and more musicians who enjoy international music have begun to play and listen to the sitar.



the images instead of Allah himself. Those beliefs have made it hard for Muslims and Hindus to agree. During the Middle Ages, Muslim armies conquered India. Today, most Pakistanis and citizens of Bangladesh are Muslim.

South Asia is a startlingly diverse place. Many of its inhabitants are vegetarian, like the Jains, and many agree with Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. Greek culture and Persian religion and ideas about government are also part of South Asia's history, as are the words, foods, and customs of traders from Portugal, Africa, China, Britain, and Indonesia. It can be hard to agree on anything, even a way to greet each other. The

British shook hands, but many South Asians are uncomfortable touching each other. Hindus show respect by putting their hands together and bowing their heads, just as they have done for 4,500 years. Muslim communities raise their right hands to their foreheads and then place them over their hearts. But somehow, in most places and at most times, the differences make life more interesting.

Sometimes a single event or celebration works for everyone—in different ways. Take Divali, India's festival of lights, which is celebrated for four days in the late fall. For Hindus who worship Vishnu and his avatar Rama, Divali is a celebration of when Rama became king. For history buffs, Divali marks when Chandra Gupta II became king. For wealthy merchant communities in Western India, Divali is the beginning of their new year and a time to worship Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. They paint their houses,

shops, and offices. They open new account books and start everything fresh. They decorate their homes with simple oil lamps or glittering electric lights, give sweets to children, and set off fireworks.

In northern India, Divali celebrates the end of the southwest monsoon and the time when the god Vishnu destroyed the demon Naraka. In this part of the country, people end Divali by burning a big paper image of the demon. But in southern India, Divali is the time for *worshipping* a demon king. According to local traditions, Vishnu conquered the local demon king Bali, and then banished him from his kingdom to live forever in the netherworld. Bali begged Vishnu to allow him to return for one day each year to visit his land and the people he greatly loved. For ten days, people celebrate the end of the harvest by singing songs about their beloved king, feasting, and giving each other presents, especially new clothes.

Another of India's popular festivals celebrates the powerful goddess Durga, also known as Kali and Lakshmi. In the 18th century CE, the Bengali poet Ramaprasad wrote, "O my mind, I tell you, worship Kali the Divine Mother, in whatever fashion you desire." When demons defeated the

“” Ramaprasad, 18th century CE



A terracotta tablet from Harappa shows the ritual slaying of a water buffalo in front of a god seated in yogic position, while a crocodile crawls above the scene. Today, the crocodile and water buffalo sacrifices are associated with the goddess Durga; these modern beliefs may have had their roots in the Indus civilization.



*A boy sells chutneys (relishes) and achar (pickles) at market in Pakistan. Flavor and variety are important to South Asian cooking—and South Asian life.*

gods, the goddess Durga appeared, her golden skin glowing like the sun. She fought the demons for seven days, finally destroying a demon called the “Water Buffalo Demon of Ignorance.” On the eighth day, she went among the people of the land and encouraged them to have a victory feast—where a water buffalo was sacrificed.

In many regions, people worship Durga for the first three nights, then worship the goddess in the form of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, for the next three. During the last three days, they worship Saraswati, the goddess of learning and music, by putting books, writing tools, and musical instruments on her altar for her to bless.

After nine nights of worship, people parade to a nearby river or lake carrying brightly decorated images of Durga made of clay, paper and bamboo. They leave the images,

which are made of papier-mâché or unfired clay, to dissolve in the water. That has been the proper way to dispose of sacred images for thousands of years.

Durga is a powerful goddess. Because she is called the “Goddess of War who fights Evil,” Durga was also worshipped by Hindu revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow outside conquerors—first Arabs, Turks, and Persians and then the British in the 19th century.

Festivals just wouldn't be festivals without lots of food. As with its art and religious beliefs, South Asia's food has been influenced by many people and places. The most common dish is called a *kari*, often translated as “curry.” Not surprisingly, “curry” means different things in the different parts in South Asia. Traditional curry is a mild sauce made with yoghurt and spices, sometimes mixed with vegetables. During the British colonial period, from 1766 to 1947, the word “curry” came to be applied to all dishes with a thick spicy sauce. The basic spices in curry powder are coriander, cumin, turmeric, and fenugreek. Hot spices such as black pepper and ginger, and aromatic spices such as cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, and cloves, are added for variety. Black pepper and ginger were the hot spices in ancient times. The chili pepper didn't arrive in South Asia until after the 1500s—now it's an important part of the South Asian cooking. Still, South Asian cooking is not so much “hot and spicy” as it is “flavorful spicy.”

It's really hard to sum up a place that is as diverse and rich in history as South Asia. It's like a flavorful curry, served with lots of chutneys and acharas on the side—sometimes sweet, sometimes sour, but always colorful and exciting.

#### I'M IN A REAL ACHAR

A South Asian meal sparks the taste buds with a blend of different flavors. A traditional meal can have up to 16 different dishes, including chutneys and acharas. Chutney, served cold or hot, is a fresh relish made with vegetables or fruit mixed with spices and other ingredients to make it sweet, hot, tangy, sour, or bitter. Acharas are pickles packed in spices and oil and are spicier than chutneys. Chutneys and acharas spark the taste buds and add variety and flavor to the main dishes.