


Ashoka

Ashoka Maurya Mauryan Samrat	
	
A "Chakravartin" ruler, first century BC/CE. Andhra Pradesh, Amaravati. Preserved at Musee Guimet	
Reign	274–232 BC
Coronation	270 BC
Full name	Ashoka Bindusara Maurya
Titles	Samraat Chakravartin; other titles include <i>Devanampriya</i> and <i>Priyadarasin</i>
Born	304 BC
Birthplace	Pataliputra, Patna
Died	232 BC (aged 72)
Place of death	Pataliputra, Patna
Buried	Ashes immersed in the Ganges River, possibly at patna, Cremated 232 BC, less than 24 hours after death
Predecessor	Bindusara
Successor	Dasaratha Maurya
Consort	Maharani Devi
Wives	Rani Tishyaraksha Rani Padmavati Rani Kaurwaki
Offspring	Mahendra, Sanghamitra, Teevala, Kunala
Royal House	Mauryan dynasty
Father	Bindusara
Mother	Rani Dharma or Shubhadrangi
Religious beliefs	Hinduism, later on embraced Buddhism

Ashok Maurya or **Ashoka** (Devanāgarī: अशोक, Bangla: অশোক, IAST: *Aśoka*, IPA: [aˈʂoːkə], ca. 304–232 BC), popularly known as **Ashoka the Great**, was an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty who ruled almost all of the Indian subcontinent from ca. 269 BC to 232 BC.^[1] One of India's greatest emperors, Ashoka reigned over most of present-day India after a number of military conquests. His empire stretched from present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan in the west, to the present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of Assam in the east, and as far south as northern Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. He conquered the kingdom named Kalinga, which no one in his dynasty had conquered starting from Chandragupta Maurya. His reign was headquartered in Magadha (present-day Bihar, India). He embraced Buddhism from the prevalent Hindu tradition after witnessing the mass deaths of the war of Kalinga, which he himself had waged out of a desire for conquest. He was later dedicated to the propagation of Buddhism

across Asia and established monuments marking several significant sites in the life of Gautama Buddha. Ashoka was a devotee of ahimsa (nonviolence), love, truth, tolerance and vegetarianism. Ashoka is remembered in history as a philanthropic administrator. In the history of India, Ashoka is referred to as *Samraat Chakravartin Ashoka* - the Emperor of Emperors *Ashoka*.

His name "aśoka" means "painless, without sorrow" in Sanskrit (the *a* privativum and *śoka* "pain, distress"). In his edicts, he is referred to as *Devānāmpriya* (Pali *Devānaṃpiya* or "The Beloved Of The Gods"), and *Priyadarśin* (Pali *Piyadasī* or "He who regards everyone with affection").

Along with the Edicts of Ashoka, his legend is related in the later 2nd century *Aśokāvadāna* ("Narrative of Asoka") and *Divyāvadāna* ("Divine narrative"), and in the Sri Lankan text *Mahāvamsa* ("Great Chronicle").

Ashoka played a critical role in helping make Buddhism a world religion.^[2] As the peace-loving ruler of one of the world's largest, richest and most powerful multi-ethnic states, he is considered an exemplary ruler, who tried to put into practice a secular state ethic of non-violence. The emblem of the modern Republic of India is an adaptation of the Lion Capital of Ashoka.

Biography

Early life

Ashoka was born to the Mauryan emperor Bindusara and his queen, Dharma [or Dhamma]. Ashokavandana states that his mother was a queen named Subhadrangi, the daughter of Champa of Telangana. A palace intrigue kept her away from the king. This eventually ended, and she bore a son. It is from her exclamation "I am now without sorrow", that Ashoka got his name. The Divyavandana tells a similar story, but gives the name of the queen as Janapadakalyani.^[3] ^[4]

Ashoka had several elder siblings, all of whom were his half-brothers from other wives of Bindusara.

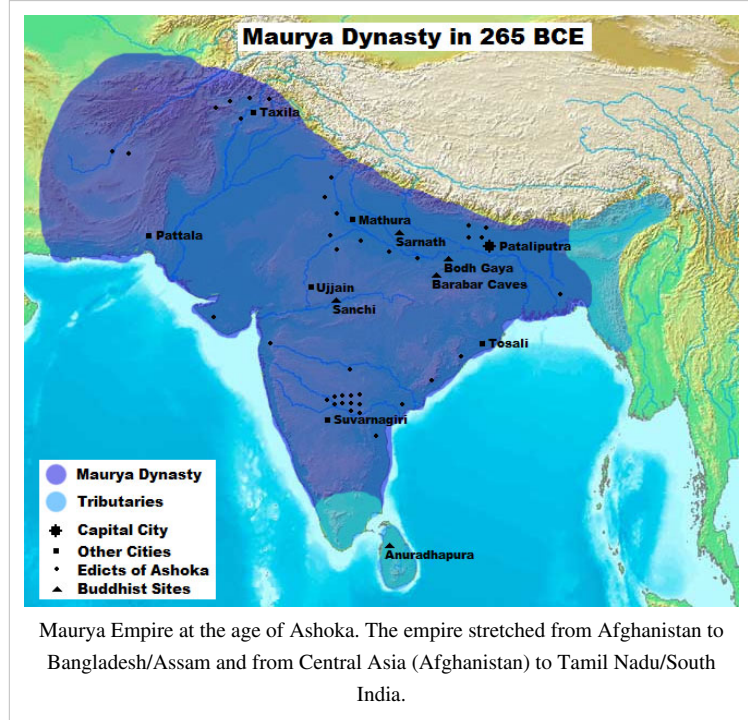
He had been given the royal military training knowledge. He was a fearsome hunter, and according to a legend, he killed a lion with just a wooden rod. He was very adventurous and a trained fighter, who was known for his skills with the sword. Because of his reputation as a frightening warrior and a heartless general, he was sent to curb the riots in the Avanti province of the Mauryan empire.^[5]

Rise to power

The Divyavandana refers to Ashoka putting down a revolt due to activities of wicked ministers. This may have been an incident in Bindusara's times. Taranatha's account states that Chanakya, one of Bindusara's great lords, destroyed the nobles and kings of 16 towns and made himself the master of all territory between the eastern and the western seas. Some historians consider this as an indication of Bindusara's conquest of the Deccan while others consider it as suppression of a revolt. Following this Ashoka was stationed at Ujjayini as governor.^[4]

Bindusara's death in 273 BC led to a war over succession. According to Divyavandana, Bindusara wanted his son Sushim to succeed him but Ashoka was supported by his father's ministers. A

minister named Radhagupta seems to have played an important role. One of the Ashokavandana states that Ashoka managed to become the king by getting rid of the legitimate heir to the throne, by tricking him into entering a pit filled with live coals. The Dipavansa and Mahavansa refer to Ashoka killing 99 of his brothers, sparing only one, named Tissa.^[4] he became a great ruler. But there is no prominent proof about this incident. The coronation happened in 269 BC, four years after his succession to the throne.



Early life as Emperor

Ashoka is said to have been of a wicked nature and bad temper. He submitted his ministers to a test of loyalty and had 500 of them killed.

Ascending the throne, Ashoka expanded his empire over the next eight years, from the present-day boundaries and regions of Burma–Bangladesh and the state of Assam in India in the east to the territory of present-day Afghanistan in the west; from the Pamir Knots in the north almost to the peninsular of southern India (i.e. Tamil Nadu / Andhra Pradesh).^[4]

Conquest of Kalinga

While the early part of Ashoka's reign was apparently quite bloodthirsty, he became a follower of the Buddha's teaching after his conquest of Kalinga on the east coast of India in the present-day states of southern Orissa and north coastal Andhra Pradesh. Kalinga was a state that prided itself on its sovereignty and democracy. With its monarchical parliamentary democracy it was quite an exception in ancient Bharata where there existed the concept of Rajdharma. Rajdharma means the duty of the rulers, which was intrinsically entwined with the concept of bravery and Kshatriya dharma. Kalinga war happened after eight years of his coronation. From his 13th inscription, we came to know that the battle was a massive one and caused death to more than 100,000 soldiers and many more common people who were defending their mother land; over 150,000 were arrested.^[6]

Buddhist conversion



A similar four "Indian lion" Lion Capital of Ashoka atop an intact Ashoka Pillar at Wat U Mong near Chiang Mai, Thailand showing another larger Dharma Chakra / Ashoka Chakra atop the four lions thought to be missing in the Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath Museum which has been adopted as the National Emblem of India.

As the legend goes, one day after the war was over, Ashoka ventured out to roam the city and all he could see were burnt houses and scattered corpses. This sight made him sick and he cried the famous monologue:

What have I done? If this is a victory, what's a defeat then? Is this a victory or a defeat? Is this justice or injustice? Is it gallantry or a rout? Is it valor to kill innocent children and women? Do I do it to widen the empire and for prosperity or to destroy the other's kingdom and splendor? One has lost her husband, someone else a father, someone a child, someone an unborn infant.... What's this debris of the corpses? Are these marks of victory or defeat? Are these vultures, crows, eagles the messengers of death or evil?

The brutality of the conquest led him to adopt Buddhism, and he used his position to propagate the relatively new religion to new heights, as far as ancient Rome and Egypt. He made Buddhism his state religion around 260 BC, and propagated it and preached it within his domain and worldwide from about 250 BC. Emperor Ashoka undoubtedly has to be credited with the first serious attempt to develop a Buddhist policy.

Prominent in this cause were his son Venerable Rahul and daughter Sanghamitra (whose name means "friend of the Sangha"), who established Buddhism in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He built thousands of Stupas and Viharas for Buddhist followers. The Stupas of Sanchi are world famous and the stupa named Sanchi Stupa was built by Emperor Ashoka. During the remaining portion of Ashoka's reign, he pursued an official policy of nonviolence (ahimsa). Even the unnecessary slaughter or mutilation of animals was immediately abolished. Everyone became protected by the king's law against sport hunting and branding. Limited hunting was permitted for consumption reasons but Ashoka also promoted the concept of vegetarianism. Ashoka also showed mercy to those imprisoned, allowing them leave for the outside a day of the year. He attempted to raise the professional ambition of the common man by building universities for study, and water transit and irrigation systems for trade and agriculture. He treated his subjects as equals regardless of their religion, politics and caste. The kingdoms surrounding his, so easily overthrown, were instead made to be well-respected allies.



Ashokan Pillar at Vaishali

He is acclaimed for constructing hospitals for animals and renovating major roads throughout India. After this transformation, Ashoka came to be known as Dhammashoka (Sanskrit), meaning Ashoka, the follower of Dharma.

Ashoka defined the main principles of dharma (dhamma) as nonviolence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience to parents, respect for the Brahmins and other religious teachers and priests, liberality towards friends, humane treatment of servants, and generosity towards all. These principles suggest a general ethic of behaviour to which no religious or social group could object.

Some critics say that Ashoka was afraid of more wars, but among his neighbors, including the Seleucid Empire and the Greco-Bactrian kingdom established by Diodotus I, none could match his strength. He was a contemporary of both Antiochus I Soter and his successor Antiochus II Theos of the Seleucid dynasty as well as Diodotus I and his son Diodotus II of the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. If his inscriptions and edicts are well studied one finds that he was familiar with the Hellenic world but never edicts, which talk of friendly relations, give the names of both Antiochus of the Seleucid empire and Ptolemy III of Egypt. The fame of the Mauryan empire was widespread from the time that Ashoka's grandfather Chandragupta Maurya defeated Seleucus Nicator, the founder of the Seleucid Dynasty.



Stupa of Sanchi.

The source of much of our knowledge of Ashoka is the many inscriptions he had carved on pillars and rocks throughout the empire. All his inscriptions have the imperial touch and show compassionate loving. He addressed his people as his "children". These inscriptions promoted Buddhist morality and encouraged nonviolence and adherence to Dharma (duty or proper behavior), and they talk of his fame and conquered lands as well as the neighboring kingdoms holding up his might. One also gets some primary information about the Kalinga War and Ashoka's allies plus some useful knowledge on the civil administration.

The Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath is the most popular of the relics left by Ashoka. Made of sandstone, this pillar records the visit of the emperor to Sarnath, in the 3rd century BC. It has a four-lion capital (four lions standing back to back) which was adopted as the emblem of the modern Indian republic. The lion symbolizes both Ashoka's imperial rule and the kingship of the Buddha. In translating these monuments, historians learn the bulk of what is assumed to have been true fact of the Mauryan Empire. It is difficult to determine whether or not some actual events ever happened, but the stone etchings clearly depict how Ashoka wanted to be thought of and remembered.

Ashoka's own words as known from his Edicts are: "All men are my children. I am like a father to them. As every father desires the good and the happiness of his children, I wish that all men should be happy always." Edward D'Cruz interprets the Ashokan dharma as a "religion to be used as a symbol of a new imperial unity and a cementing force to weld the diverse and heterogeneous elements of the empire".

Also, in the Edicts, Ashoka mentions Hellenistic kings of the period as converts to Buddhism, although no Hellenic historical record of this event remain:

The conquest by Dharma has been won here, on the borders, and even six hundred yojanas (5,400–9,600 km) away, where the Greek king Antiochos rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonos, Magas and Alexander rule, likewise in the south among the Cholas, the Pandyas, and as far as Tambaparni (Sri Lanka).

—Edicts of Ashoka, Rock Edict 13 (S. Dhammika)

Ashoka also claims that he encouraged the development of herbal medicine, for human and nonhuman animals, in their territories:

Everywhere within Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi's [Ashoka's] domain, and among the people beyond the borders, the Cholas, the Pandyas, the Satiyaputras, the Keralaputras, as far as Tamraparni and where the

Greek king Antiochos rules, and among the kings who are neighbors of Antiochos, everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Wherever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Wherever medical roots or fruits are not available I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals.

—Edicts of Ashoka, Rock Edict 2

The Greeks in India even seem to have played an active role in the propagation of Buddhism, as some of the emissaries of Ashoka, such as Dharmarakṣita, are described in Pali sources as leading Greek (Yona) Buddhist monks, active in spreading Buddhism (the Mahāvamsa, XII^[7]).

Death and legacy

Ashoka ruled for an estimated forty years. After his death, the Mauryan dynasty lasted just fifty more years. Ashoka had many wives and children, but many of their names are lost to time. Mahindra and Sanghamitra were twins born by his first wife, Devi, in the city of Ujjain. He had entrusted to them the job of making his state religion, Buddhism, more popular across the known and the unknown world. Mahindra and Sanghamitra went into Sri Lanka and converted the King, the Queen and their people to Buddhism. They were naturally not handling state affairs after him.

In his old age, he seems to have come under the spell of his youngest wife Tishyaraksha. It is said that she had got his son Kunala, the regent in Takshashila, blinded by a wily stratagem. The official executioners spared Kunala and he became a wandering singer accompanied by his favourite wife Kanchanmala. In Pataliputra, Ashoka hears Kunala's song, and realizes that Kunala's misfortune may have been a punishment for some past sin of the emperor himself and condemns Tishyaraksha to death, restoring Kunala to the court. Kunala was succeeded by his son, Samprati, but his rule did not last long after Ashoka's death.

The reign of Ashoka Maurya could easily have disappeared into history as the ages passed by, and would have had he not left behind a record of his trials. The testimony of this wise king was discovered in the form of magnificently sculpted pillars and boulders with a variety of actions and teachings he wished to be published etched into the stone. What Ashoka left behind was the first written language in India since the ancient city of Harappa. The language used for inscription was the then current spoken form called Prakrit.

In the year 185 BC, about fifty years after Ashoka's death, the last Maurya ruler, Brhadrata, was assassinated by the commander-in-chief of the Mauryan armed forces, Pusyamitra Sunga, while he was taking the Guard of Honor of his forces. Pusyamitra Sunga founded the Sunga dynasty (185 BC-78 BC) and ruled just a fragmented part of the Mauryan Empire. Many of the northwestern territories of the Mauryan Empire (modern-day Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan) became the Indo-Greek Kingdom.

In 1992, Ashoka was ranked #53 on Michael H. Hart's list of the most influential figures in history. In 2001, a semi-fictionalized portrayal of Ashoka's life was produced as a motion picture under the title *Asoka*. King Ashoka, the third monarch of the Indian Mauryan dynasty, has come to be regarded as one of the most exemplary rulers in world history. The British historian H.G. Wells has written: "Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines, almost alone, a star."



The Junagadh rock contains inscriptions by Ashoka (fourteen of the Edicts of Ashoka), Rudradaman I and Skandagupta.

Buddhist Kingship

Further information: Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Buddhism in Burma

One of the more enduring legacies of Ashoka Maurya was the model that he provided for the relationship between Buddhism and the state. Throughout Theravada Southeastern Asia, the model of ruler ship embodied by Ashoka replaced the notion of divine kingship that had previously dominated (in the Angkor kingdom, for instance). Under this model of 'Buddhist kingship', the king sought to legitimize his rule not through descent from a divine source, but by supporting and earning the approval of the Buddhist *sangha*. Following Ashoka's example, kings established monasteries, funded the construction of stupas, and supported the ordination of monks in their kingdom. Many rulers also took an active role in resolving disputes over the status and regulation of the sangha, as Ashoka had in calling a conclave to settle a number of contentious issues during his reign. This development ultimately lead to a close association in many Southeast Asian countries between the monarchy and the religious hierarchy, an association that can still be seen today in the state-supported Buddhism of Thailand and the traditional role of the Thai king as both a religious and secular leader. Ashoka also said that all his courtiers were true to their self and governed the people in a moral manner.

Historical sources

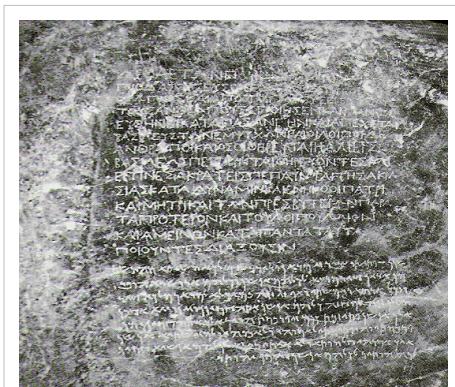
Western sources

Ashoka was almost forgotten by the historians of the early British India, but James Prinsep contributed in the revelation of historical sources. Another important historian was British archaeologist John Hubert Marshall who was director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India. His main interests were Sanchi and Sarnath besides Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Sir Alexander Cunningham, a British archaeologist and army engineer and often known as the father of the Archaeological Survey of India, unveiled heritage sites like the Bharhut Stupa, Sarnath, Sanchi, and the Mahabodhi Temple; thus, his contribution is recognizable in realms of historical sources. Mortimer Wheeler, a British archaeologist, also exposed Ashokan historical sources, especially the Taxila.

Eastern sources

Information about the life and reign of Ashoka primarily comes from a relatively small number of Buddhist sources. In particular, the Sanskrit *Ashokavadana* ('Story of Ashoka'), written in the 2nd century, and the two Pāli chronicles of Sri Lanka (the Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa) provide most of the currently known information about Ashoka. Additional information is contributed by the Edicts of Asoka, whose authorship was finally attributed to the Ashoka of Buddhist legend after the discovery of dynastic lists that gave the name used in the edicts (*Priyadarsi* – 'favored by the Gods') as a title or additional name of Ashoka Mauriya. Architectural remains of his period have been found at Kumhrar, Patna, which include an 80-pillar hypostyle hall.

Edicts of Ashoka -The Edicts of Ashoka are a collection of 33 inscriptions on the Pillars of Ashoka, as well as boulders and cave walls, made by the Emperor Ashoka of the Mauryan dynasty during his reign from 272 to 231 BC. These inscriptions are dispersed throughout the areas of modern-day Pakistan and India, and represent the first tangible evidence of Buddhism. The edicts describe in detail the first wide expansion of Buddhism through the sponsorship of one of the most powerful kings of Indian history. It give more information about Ashoka's proselytism, Moral precepts, Religious precepts, Social and animal welfare .



Bilinguial inscription in (Greek and Aramaic) by king Ashoka, from Kandahar (Shar-i-kuna).
Kabul Museum.

Ashokavadana - The Ashokavadana is a 2nd century CE text related to the legend of the Maurya Emperor Ashoka. The legend was translated into Chinese by Fa Hien in 300 CE.

Mahavamsa -The Mahavamsa ("Great Chronicle") is a historical poem written in the Pali language, of the kings of Sri Lanka. It covers the period from the coming of King Vijaya of Kalinga (ancient Orissa) in 543 BC to the reign of King Mahasena (334–361).As it often refers to the royal dynasties of India, the Mahavamsa is also valuable for historians who wish to date and relate contemporary royal dynasties in the Indian subcontinent. It is very important in dating the consecration of the Maurya emperor Ashoka.

Dipavamsa -The Dipavamsa, or "Deepavamsa", (i.e., Chronicle of the Island, in Pali) is the oldest historical record of Sri Lanka. The chronicle is believed to be compiled from Atthakatha and other sources around the 3–4th century, King Dhatusena (4th century CE) had ordered that the Dipavamsa be recited at the Mahinda (son to Ashoka) festival held annually in Anuradhapura.

The use of Buddhist sources in reconstructing the life of Ashoka has had a strong influence on perceptions of Ashoka, as well as the interpretations of his edicts. Building on traditional accounts, early scholars regarded Ashoka as a primarily Buddhist monarch who underwent a conversion to Buddhism and was actively engaged in sponsoring and supporting the Buddhist monastic institution. Some scholars have tended to question this assessment. The only source of information not attributable to Buddhist sources are the Ashokan edicts, and these do not explicitly state that Ashoka was a Buddhist. In his edicts, Ashoka expresses support for all the major religions of his time: Buddhism, Brahmanism, Jainism, and Ajivikaism, and his edicts addressed to the population at large (there are some addressed specifically to Buddhists; this is not the case for the other religions) generally focus on moral themes members of all the religions would accept.

However, there is strong evidence in the edicts alone that he was a Buddhist. In one edict he belittles rituals, and he banned Vedic animal sacrifices; these strongly suggest that he at least did not look to the Vedic tradition for guidance. Furthermore, there are many edicts expressed to Buddhists alone; in one, Ashoka declares himself to be an "upasaka", and in another he demonstrates a close familiarity with Buddhist texts. He erected rock pillars at Buddhist holy sites, but did not do so for the sites of other religions. He also used the word "dhamma" to refer to qualities of the heart that underlie moral action; this was an exclusively Buddhist use of the word. Finally, the ideals he promotes correspond to the first three steps of the Buddha's graduated discourse.^[8]

Contributions

Global spread of Buddhism

Ashoka, now a Buddhist emperor, believed that Buddhism is beneficial for all human beings as well as animals and plants, so he built 84,000 stupas, Sangharama, viharas, Chaitya, and residences for Buddhist monks all over South Asia and Central Asia. He gave donations to viharas and mathas. He sent his only daughter Sanghamitta and son Mahindra to spread Buddhism in Sri Lanka (ancient name Tamraparni). Ashoka also sent many prominent Buddhist monks (bhikshus) Sthaviras like Madhyamik Sthavira to modern Kashmir and Afghanistan; Maharaskshit Sthavira to Syria, Persia / Iran, Egypt, Greece, Italy and Turkey; Massim Sthavira to Nepal, Bhutan, China and Mongolia; Sohn Uttar Sthavira to modern Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar (old name Suvarnabhumi for Burma and Thailand), Thailand and Vietnam; Mahadhhamarakhkhita stahvira to Maharashtra (old name Maharatthha); Maharakhhit Sthavira and Yavandhammarakhkhita Sthavira to South India. Ashoka also invited Buddhists and non-Buddhists for religious conferences. Ashoka inspired the Buddhist monks to compose the sacred religious texts, and also gave all types of help to that end. Ashoka also helped to develop viharas (intellectual hubs) such as Nalanda and Taxila. Ashoka helped to construct Sanchi and Mahabodhi Temple. Ashoka never tried to harm or to destroy non-Buddhist religions, and indeed gave donations to non-Buddhists. As his reign continued his even-handedness was replaced with special inclination towards Buddhism.^[9] Ashoka helped and respected both Sramans (Buddhists monks) and Brahmins (Vedic monks). Ashoka also helped to organize the Third Buddhist council (c. 250 BC) at Pataliputra (today's Patna).

It was conducted by the monk Moggaliputta-Tissa who was the spiritual teacher of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka.

As administrator



Mauryan ringstone, with standing goddess. Northwest Pakistan. third century BC. British Museum.

Ashoka's military power was so strong that he was able to crush those empires that went to war against him. Still, he was on friendly terms with kingdoms in the South like Cholas, Pandya, Keralputra, the post Alexandrian empire, Tamraparni, and Suvarnabhumi who were strong enough to remain outside his empire and continued to profess Hinduism. According to his edicts we know that he provided humanitarian help including doctors, hospitals, inns, wells, medical herbs and engineers to his neighboring countries. In neighboring countries, Ashoka helped humans as well as animals. Ashoka also planted trees in his empire and

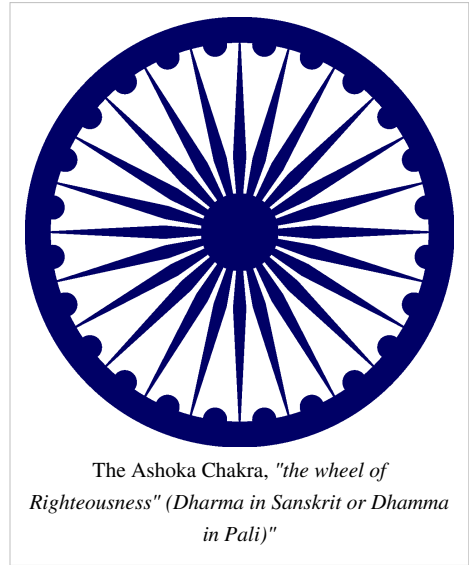
his neighboring countries. Ashoka was perhaps the first emperor in human history to ban slavery, hunting, fishing and deforestation. Ashoka also banned the death sentence and asked the same for the neighboring countries.^[10] Ashoka commanded his people to serve the orders of their elders parents and religious monks (shramana and Brahmin). Ashoka also recommended his people study and respect all religions. According to Ashoka, to harm another's religion is a harm to one's own religion. Ashoka asserted his people to live with Dharmacharana. Ashoka asked people to live with harmony, peace, love and tolerance. Ashoka called his people as his children, and they could call him when they need him. He also asked people to save money and not to spend for immoral causes. Ashoka also believed in dharmacharana (dhammacharana) and dharmavijaya (dhammavijaya). According to many European and Asian historians the age of Ashoka was the age of light and delightment. He was the first emperor in human history who has taught the lesson of unity, peace, equality and love. Ashoka's aim was not to expand the territories but the welfare of all of his subjects (sarvajansukhay). In his vast empire there was no evidence of recognizable mutiny or civil war. Ashoka was the true devotee of nonviolence, peace and love. This made him different from other emperors. Ashoka also helped Buddhism as well as religions like Jainism, Hinduism, Hellenic polytheism and Ajivikas. Ashoka was against any discrimination among humans. He helped students, the poor, orphans and the elderly with social, political and economic help. According to Ashoka, hatred gives birth to hatred and a feeling of love gives birth to love and mercy. According to him the happiness of people is the happiness of the ruler. His opinion was that the sword is not as powerful as love. Ashoka was also kind to prisoners, and respected animal life and tree life. Ashoka allowed females to be educated. He also permitted females to enter religious institutions. He allowed female Buddhist monastics such as Bhikkhuni. He combined in himself the complexity of a king and a simplicity of a buddhist monk. Because of these reasons he is known as the emperor of all ages and thus became a milestone in the History of the world.

Ashoka Chakra

The Ashoka Chakra (the wheel of Ashoka) is a depiction of the Dharmachakra or Dhammachakka in Pali, the Wheel of Dharma (Sanskrit: Chakra means wheel). The wheel has 24 spokes. The Ashoka Chakra has been widely inscribed on many relics of the Mauryan Emperor, most prominent among which is the Lion Capital of Sarnath and The Ashoka Pillar. The most visible use of the Ashoka Chakra today is at the centre of the National flag of the Republic of India (adopted on 22 July 1947), where it is rendered in a Navy-blue color on a White background, by replacing the symbol of Charkha (Spinning wheel) of the pre-independence versions of the flag. Ashoka Chakra can also be seen on the base of Lion Capital of Ashoka which has been adopted as the National Emblem of India.

The Ashoka chakra was built by Ashoka during his reign. Chakra is a Sanskrit word which also means cycle or self repeating process. The process it signifies is the cycle of time as how the world changes with time.

A few days before India became independent on August 1947, the specially constituted Constituent Assembly decided that the flag of India must be acceptable to all parties and communities.^[11] A flag with three colours, Saffron, White and Green with the Ashoka Chakra was selected.



Pillars of Ashoka (Ashokstambha)



The Asokan pillar at Lumbini, Nepal

The pillars of Ashoka are a series of columns dispersed throughout the northern Indian subcontinent, and erected by Ashoka during his reign in the 3rd century BC. Originally, there must have been many pillars of Ashoka although only ten with inscriptions still survive. Averaging between forty and fifty feet in height, and weighing up to fifty tons each, all the pillars were quarried at Chunar, just south of Varanasi and dragged, sometimes hundreds of miles, to where they were erected. The first Pillar of Ashoka was found in the 16th century by Thomas Coryat in the ruins of ancient Delhi. The wheel represents the sun time and Buddhist law, while the swastika stands for the cosmic dance around a fixed center and guards against evil. There is no evidence of a swastika, or manji, on the pillars.

Lion Capital of Asoka (Ashokmudra)

The Lion capital of Ashoka is a sculpture of four "Indian lions" standing back to back. It was originally placed atop the Aśoka pillar at Sarnath, now in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. The pillar, sometimes called the Aśoka Column is still in its original location, but the Lion Capital is now in the Sarnath Museum. This Lion Capital of Ashoka from Sarnath has been adopted as the National Emblem of India and the wheel "Ashoka Chakra" from its base was placed onto the center of the National Flag of India.

The capital contains four lions (Indian / Asiatic Lions), standing back to back, mounted on an abacus, with a frieze carrying sculptures in high relief of an elephant, a galloping horse, a bull, and a lion, separated by intervening spoked chariot-wheels over a bell-shaped lotus. Carved out of a single block of polished sandstone, the capital was believed to be crowned by a 'Wheel of Dharma' (Dharmachakra popularly known in India as the "Ashoka Chakra").

The Ashoka Lion capital or the Sarnath lion capital is also known as the national symbol of India. The Sarnath pillar bears one of the Edicts of Ashoka, an inscription against division within the Buddhist community, which reads, "No one shall cause division in the order of monks". The Sarnath pillar is a column surmounted by a capital, which consists of a canopy representing an inverted bell-shaped lotus flower, a short cylindrical abacus with four 24-spoked Dharma wheels with four animals (an elephant, a bull, a horse, a lion).

The four animals in the Sarnath capital are believed to symbolize different steps of Lord Buddha's life.

- The Elephant represents the Buddha's idea in reference to the dream of Queen Maya of a white elephant entering her womb.
- The Bull represents desire during the life of the Buddha as a prince.
- The Horse represents Buddha's departure from palatial life.
- The Lion represents the accomplishment of Buddha.

Besides the religious interpretations, there are some non-religious interpretations also about the symbolism of the Ashoka capital pillar at Sarnath. According to them, the four lions symbolize Ashoka's rule over the four directions, the wheels as symbols of his enlightened rule (Chakravartin) and the four animals as symbols of four adjoining territories of India.

Constructions credited to Ashoka

- Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, India
- Dhamek Stupa, Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India
- Mahabodhi Temple, Bihar, India
- Barabar Caves, Bihar, India
- Nalanda University (Vishwavidyalaya), (some portions like Sariputta Stupa), Bihar, India
- Taxila University (Vishwavidyalaya), (some portions like Dharmarajika Stupa and Kunala Stupa), Taxila, Pakistan
- Bhir Mound, (*reconstructed*), Taxila, Pakistan
- Bharhut stupa, Madhya Pradesh, India
- Deorkothar Stupa, Madhya Pradesh, India
- Butkara Stupa, Swat, Pakistan



The Asokan pillar at Lumbini, Nepal

Ashoka today

In art, film and literature

- *Asoka* is a 2001 epic Bollywood historical drama. It is a largely fictional version of the life of the Indian emperor Ashoka. The film was directed by Santosh Sivan and stars Shahrukh Khan as Ashoka and Kareena Kapoor as Kaurwaki, a princess of Kalinga. The film ends with Asoka renouncing the sword and embracing Buddhism. The final narrative describes how Asoka not only built a large empire, but spread Buddhism and the winds of peace through it.
- One of the most famous figures in modern Hindi literature, Jaishankar Prasad, composed *Ashoka ki chinta* (in English: *Anxiety of Ashoka*), a famous Hindi verse. The poem portrays Ashoka's heart during the war of Kalinga.
- *Uttar-Priyadarshi* (The Final Beatitude) a verse-play written by poet Agyeya, depicting his redemption, was adapted to stage in 1996 by theatre director, Ratan Thiyam and has since been performed in many parts of the world.^[12] ^[13]
- In Piers Anthony's series of space opera novels, the main character mentions Asoka as a model for administrators to strive for.

Footnotes

- [1] Thapur (1973), p. 51.
- [2] Bruce Rich. To Uphold The World Author Discussion (<http://www.tibethouse.us/programs/view/102312/4>)
- [3] K. T. S. Sarao (2007). *A text book of the history of Theravāda Buddhism* (2 ed.). Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Delhi. p. 89. ISBN 9788186700662.
- [4] Upinder Singh (2008). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th century*. Pearson Education. ISBN 9788131716779.
- [5] Prachin bharoter itihās by Sunil Chatterjee
- [6] prachin bharater itihās by sunil chattopadhyay
- [7] Full text of the Mahāvamsa Click chapter XII (<http://lakdiva.org/mahavamsa/chapters.html>)
- [8] Richard Robinson, Willard Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Buddhist Religions*, fifth ed., Wadsworth 2005, page 59.
- [9] N.V. Isaeva, *Shankara and Indian philosophy*. SUNY Press, 1993, page 24.
- [10] Available at: Asoka: Rock and Pillar Edicts (<http://www.thenagain.info/Classes/Sources/Asoka.html>). Then Again: David Koeller. Retrieved on: 2009-02-21
- [11] Heimer, Željko (2 July 2006). "India" (<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/in.html>). *Flags of the World*. . Retrieved 2006-10-11.
- [12] Margo Jefferson (October 27, 2000). "Next Wave Festival Review; In Stirring Ritual Steps, Past and Present Unfold" (<http://theater.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?pagewanted=print&res=990ce6dc1131f934a15753c1a9669c8b63>). *New York Times*. .
- [13] Review: Uttarpriyadarshi (http://www.ballet.co.uk/magazines/yr_00/dec00/tr_rev_crt_1000.htm) by Renee Renouf, *ballet magazine*, December 2000,

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External links

- Ashoka (http://www.dmoz.org/Society/History/By_Region/Asia/South_Asia/Personalities/Ashoka/) at the Open Directory Project
- International Vegetarian Union: King Asoka of India (<http://www.ivu.org/history/east/asoka.html>)

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