

A SURVEY ON THE MAURYAN EMPEROR ASHOKA THE GREAT

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ABSTRACT

King Asoka, 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 ... the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star." Although Buddhist literature preserved the legend of this ruler -- the story of a cruel and ruthless king who converted to Buddhism and thereafter established a reign of virtue -- definitive historical records of his reign were lacking. Then in the nineteenth century there came to light a large number of edicts, in India, Nepal, Pakistan and Afghanistan. These edicts, inscribed on rocks and pillars, proclaim Asoka's reforms and policies and promulgate his advice to his subjects. The present rendering of these edicts, based on earlier translations, offers us insights into a powerful and capable ruler's attempt to establish an empire on the foundation of righteousness, a reign which makes the moral and spiritual welfare of his subjects its primary concern. The Australian bhikkhu Ven. S. Dhammika, the compiler of the present work, is the spiritual director of the Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society in Singapore.

INTRODUCTION

Ashoka Maurya (304–232 BCE) commonly known as **Ashoka** and also as **Ashoka the Great**, was an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty who ruled almost all of the Indian subcontinent from ca. 269 BCE to 232 BCE. One of India's greatest emperors, Ashoka reigned over most of present-day India after a number of military conquests. His empire stretched from the Hindu Kush mountains in Afghanistan to present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of Assam in the east, and as far south as northern Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. The empire had Taxila, Ujjain and Pataliputra as its capital. In about 260 BCE Ashoka waged a bitterly destructive war against the state of Kalinga (modern Odisha). He conquered Kalinga, which none of his ancestors (starting from Chandragupta Maurya) had done. His reign was headquartered in Magadha (present-day Bihar). He embraced Buddhism after witnessing the mass deaths of the Kalinga War, which he himself had waged out of a desire for conquest. "Ashoka reflected on the war in Kalinga, which reportedly had resulted in more than 100,000 deaths and 150,000 deportations." Ashoka converted gradually to Buddhism beginning about 263 BCE at the latest. 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 regarded Buddhism as a doctrine that could serve as a cultural foundation for political unity." Ashoka is now remembered as a philanthropic administrator. In the Kalinga edicts, he addresses his people as his "children", and mentions that as a father he desires their good.

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 Devānāmpiya or "The Beloved of the Gods"), and Priyadarśin (Pali Piyadasī or "He who regards everyone with affection"). His fondness for his name's connection to the Saraca asoca tree, or the "Asoka tree" is also referenced in the Ashokavadana.

H.G. Wells wrote of Ashoka in A Short History of the World (H. G. Wells):

In the history of the world there have been thousands of kings and emperors who called themselves "Their Highnesses," "Their Majesties," "Their Exalted Majesties," and so on. They shone for a brief moment, and as quickly disappeared. But Ashoka shines and shines brightly like a bright star, even unto this day.

PHILOSOPHY OF KING ASHOKA

Asoka was one of the most powerful kings of the Indian subcontinent. A ruler of the Mauryan Empire, Ashoka ruled over the country from 273 BC to 232 BC. The reign of Emperor Asoka covered most of India, South Asia and beyond, stretching from present day Afghanistan and parts of Persia in the west, to Bengal and Assam in the east, and Mysore in the south. However, the Battle of Kalinga changed King Asoka completely. From a power hungry emperor, he turned into a Buddhist follower and started preaching the principles of Buddhism throughout the world.

Asoka was born in 304 BC, to Mauryan Emperor Bindusara and a relatively lower ranked queen, Dharma. The legend associated with the emperor goes that his birth had been predicted by Buddha, in the story of 'The Gift of Dust'. Buddhist Emperor Ashoka had only one younger sibling, Vitthashoka, but, several elder half-brothers. Right from his childhood days Ashoka showed great promise in the field of weaponry skills as well as academics.

THE BATTLE OF KALINGA

The battle of Kalinga (now Orissa) became a turning point in the life of 'Asoka the Great'. The exact reason for the battle is not known. However, it is believed that one of Ashoka's brothers took refuge at Kalinga and this enraged Asoka, who launched a brutal assault on the province. The whole of the province was plundered and destroyed and thousands of people were killed.

ASHOKA CHAKRA

The Ashoka Chakra (the wheel of Ashok the Great) 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. The horse means accuracy and speed while the bull means hard work.

HISTORICAL VIEW OF ASHOKA

Ashok Bindusara Maurya was born to the Mauryan emperor Bindusara and his Queen 'Dharma' (although she was a Brahmin or Shubhadra, she was undervalued as she wasn't of royal blood). Mauryas were the Murs or rather Mors, and another view of a Jat origin of Indo-Scythian lineage. Ashoka had several elder siblings (all half-brothers from other wives of Bindusara). He had just one younger sibling, Vitthashoka (a much loved brother from the same mother). Because of his exemplary intellect and warrior skills, he was said to have been the favorite of his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya. As the legend goes, when Chandragupta Maurya left his empire for a Jain living, he threw his sword away. Ashoka found the sword and kept it, in spite of his grandfather's warning.

Maurya, who was founder of Maurya destiny, and grandfather to Ashoka, in his adolescence, was rude and naughty. He was a fearsome hunter. He was a kshatriya and was given all royal military trainings and other Vedic knowledge. According to a legend, he killed a Lion with just a wooden rod. Ashoka was known for his sword fighting. He was very adventurous and this made him a terrific fighter. Ashoka was a frightening warrior and a heartless general. Because of this quality he was sent to destroy the riot of Avanti. Many historians assert that he might have killed his own brothers who came against his way to power.

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.

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