

Asoka

Emperor Asoka is regarded as one of the greatest rulers in India's history. His grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya, ruled India for twenty-four years. It is reported that Chandragupta ascended the throne in 322 B.C. at the capital of Pataliputra by murdering the Nanda king and proclaiming the beginning of the Maurya dynasty (Smith 13). The entirety of his reign was defined by opulence and totalitarianism. Bindusara Amitraghata, Chandragupta's son, took over the empire after Chandragupta died or abdicated and presumably began his reign in either 301 or 298 B.C, and ruled for twenty-five or twenty-eight years according to different authorities (Smith 18). He conquered much of southern India during his reign and then passed on the empire to his son Asoka-varadhana, also called Asoka, who became the third ruler of the Maurya dynasty.

Legends claim that Bindusara initially disliked Asoka as a young man due to his unattractive physical appearance. Soon after though, Asoka's other qualities impressed Bindusara, who then appointed Asoka as a prince (Thapar 21). Asoka ascended the throne at Pataliputra in 273 B.C. It is acknowledged that his coronation was delayed for four years until 269 B.C.; the cause of the delay is still debated between scholars as some believe it to be due to an unclear succession that involved much violence, while others believe that such a struggle was not likely required to solidify the succession to such a well established throne in such a resolutely united empire (Smith 20). The events surrounding Asoka's death are still unknown as there are no monuments to mark the location of his remains. Both the Hindu Puranas and the chronicles of Ceylon assign Asoka's reign to be forty to forty-one years long beginning with his accession in 273 B.C. to his death at around 232 B.C (Smith 68).

Tradition states that in Asoka's early years he followed the Brahman religion, with special adherence to Siva, and it is assumed that he led the life of a Hindu *raja* (king) (Smith 23). The Buddhist monks who attempted to chronicle Asoka's reign tried to assert the emperor as a cruel monster before he converted to Buddhism. These claims, however, have no historical value and are treated as stories designed to lead the reader to think Asoka's transformation was much greater than it actually was (Smith 23). There are no records of Asoka waging war on anyone during his early years as ruler. The first major documented event in Asoka's reign was his bloody victory over the Kingdom of the Three Kalingas in 261 B.C. (Smith 24). Due to the horrific nature of the battle with the Kalingas, Asoka was given the name Asoka the Wicked or Asoka the Fierce. Later on he is called Asoka the Pious or Asoka the Righteous after he renounces his violent war-like conduct for a more *dharmic* approach to kingship. Despite his victory in the war with the Kalingas, Asoka felt great remorse for the death and suffering his actions had caused (Smith 24). As a result, there has been no reason to believe that Asoka instigated an aggressive war ever again. Asoka began to devote his life to *dharma* and never permitted himself to be tempted to wage unprovoked war again (Smith 26). To live a life devoted to *dharma* is to live righteously and morally, with particular regard to religious teachings and law.

It has been determined that Asoka's conversion to Buddhism occurred around 261-260 B.C., and that he did not always rule exactly the way a theoretical Buddhist king should. According to the Sanskrit text *Asokavadana*, Asoka was still very interested in maintaining his rule in the empire and had no scruples about punishing or disposing of those who opposed him in any way (Strong 43). Consequently, he is rarely referred to as a *cakravartin*, an ideal Buddhist king, but rather is called a *balacakravartin*, an armed Buddhist king who must "use or threaten

physical force to become ruler of his cosmos” (Strong 50). It is widely accepted that Asoka protected, propagated and loved the teaching of *dharma*, which he often called the Law of Piety. The Hindu interpretation of *dharma* differs from Asoka’s Buddhist interpretation in the way that Hindus upheld the caste system and believed that each caste had its own *dharma*, whereas Asoka dropped the caste system and also placed respect for the sanctity of animal life and reverence towards elders in much higher regard than Hindu tradition (Smith 29-30). About four years after Asoka became an *upasaka* (a lay Buddhist), he progressed so much in his spiritual journey that he became a *bhiksu* (a Buddhist monk). Scholars believe “that Asoka was both monk and monarch at the same time” based on the clear testimony of the rock edicts he issued in 257 B.C. (Smith 35). It is possible, according to scripture on Buddhist ordination (*upasampada*), that he lived as a monk temporarily because ordination does not require lifelong vows, and therefore Asoka could have resumed a civil life after any period of time (Smith 38). Asoka’s devotion to the teachings of *dharma* prompted him to use his enormous imperial power to organize “the most comprehensive scheme of religious missionary enterprise recorded in the history of the world” (Smith 46). Asoka’s efforts resulted in spreading Buddhism as a dominant religion throughout India and other countries in Asia. It is important to realize that when one applies Asoka’s policy of religious tolerance and acceptance to the modern connotation of the word tolerance that in his time there were no truly diverse religions in India. In other words, the only organized religions were Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism while Jesus and Zarathustra were figures still unknown to the emperor (Smith 61).

Asoka is most well-known for is the creation of his vast number of *stupas*, monuments, pillars and rock edicts. The numerous inscriptions found on these various objects were mostly recorded by Asoka and provide the leading authentic history of events during his reign (Smith

20). There exists an exaggerated legend that Asoka erected eighty-four thousand *stupas*, a memorial mound containing relics of important persons, within the span of three years (Smith 107). The actual number of *stupas* is much smaller. The most important inscriptions made during Asoka's reign were those found on the Major and Minor Rock Edicts and the Pillar Edicts; these inscriptions defined Asoka's policy of Dharma (Thapar 2). The *dharma* ethics in these edicts are Buddhist rather than Brahmanical (Smith 30). There are fourteen major rock edicts located at Kalsi, Mansehra, Shahbazgarhi, Girnar, Sopara, Yerragudi, Dhauli and Jaugada; and various other minor rock edicts located throughout the country (Thapar 5). Asoka particularly enjoyed erecting large numbers of monolithic pillars, both inscribed and uninscribed, throughout his empire (Smith 116-117). Seven major pillars exist at Allahabad, Delhi-Topra, Delhi-Meerut, Lauriya-Araraja, Lauriya-Nandangarh and Rampurva (Thapar 5). It is because of the tales inscribed on the rock edicts that scholars have been able to authentically document the earliest events in Asoka's reign, the conquest of the Kalingas, for example, and many more of the major events that occurred during his rule (Smith 24). The third and fourth major rock edicts describe the years 257 and 256 B.C.E. as the period of Asoka's great advance in his spiritual development and religious policy (Smith 52). The final depictions that scholars have of the historical Asoka are found on the Minor Pillar Edicts, which describe "him as the watchful guardian of the unity and discipline of the Church which he loved" (Smith 67).

There is a great deal of evidence of various types available on the history of the Mauryan dynasty, particularly on Asoka's life and reign during that period (Thapar 11). To consider all of the legends of Asoka would be an overwhelming task for this article, as there are stories about him in many different languages from many different sources (Strong 16). Some of these sources include texts such as the *Asokavadana*, the *Divyavadana*, the *Mahavamsa* and the *Dipavamsa*,

the *Asokasutra*, the *Kunalasutra*, and the Puranas. The *Asokavadana* is a Sanskrit text which starts with details of the life of the elder Upagupta, a Buddhist monk who later plays a major role in Asoka's career as ruler (Strong 16). The text then goes on to tell the entire Buddhist legend of Asoka's life and his path to becoming a dharmic king. The legend includes several variations of how Asoka was introduced to Buddhism and how he spent his last years (Thapar 35 & 192). The efforts of many scholars to establish an accurate chronology of Asoka's reign has resulted in the conclusion that the *Asokavadana* itself does not explicitly date events during Asoka's life (Strong 12). The *Asokavadana* is said to be part of the *Divyavadana*, a voluminous Sanskrit anthology of Buddhist legends: some Chinese translations of the *Asokavadana* claim it is a separate, independent work of the *Divyavadana* (Strong 16). The *Kunalasutra* is another text that contains the same legends found in the *Asokavadana* but sheds a different light on these legends (Thapar 192). *Kunalasutra*'s authors did not compose the text to shape Asoka's character in a particular way, but to document the legends as they were in local tradition (Thapar 193). The *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa* are Ceylon chronicles that describe in great detail the part Asoka played in expanding Buddhism in India, particularly to Ceylon (Thapar 8). It is important to note that many of the legends of Asoka written in Buddhist texts were written by Buddhist monks and therefore depict Asoka from an orthodox Buddhist standpoint.

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- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashoka_the_Great
<http://www.humanistictexts.org/asoka.htm>
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