

BRIA 14 4 b The Edicts of Asoka

This short summary describes the rise of Emperor Aśoka (sounds like Ashoka) in what is today modern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan. Pay special attention to the edicts (governing rules) at the bottom of the document and how they overlap or differ from Aristotle's teleological structure of human and animal relations.

The Mauryan Empire

Aśoka's grandfather, the Emperor Chandragupta Maurya, is inspired by Alexander the Great who conquered much of modern South Asia.

Alexander the Great, a Greek general from Macedonia, was one of the greatest conquerors of all time. By 297 B.C., Alexander and his huge army of foot soldiers, cavalry, and war elephants had conquered much of what is now India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. King Asoka's warlike grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya, may have met Alexander the Great when the Greek conqueror forced his way into Northern India. Alexander's conquests may have inspired Asoka's grandfather. Twenty-four years after taking the throne, Chandragupta had unified the many different cultures, ethnic groups, languages, and religions of Northern and Central India. Chandragupta's kingdom became known as the Mauryan Empire.

After ruling for 24 years, Chandragupta became a Jainist. Jainism is a highly puritanical offshoot of Hinduism. Chandragupta abdicated the throne. He gave up all his possessions and wandered his empire until he died of slow starvation, a traditional way for Jainists to die.

Recall that the Jain tradition is a community co-existing in the subcontinent, along with Vedic-Hindu traditions and Buddhist traditions who all cross-pollinated their ideas and identities. It is not accurate to describe it as an "offshoot of Hinduism." It is better to understand Jaina, Vedic-Hindu, and Buddhist traditions (among several others at the time) as distinct communities that developed through debate, overlap and dialectic identity formation.

Grandpa
Candragupta
Maurya dies,
succeeded by his
son Bindusara.

Bindusara's sons,
including Aśoka, vie
for control over
different regions.

After Bindusara's
death, Aśoka takes
control of the huge
Mauryan Empire
(approx. 269 BCE).

King Chandragupta's son, Bindusara ("Destroyer of Foes"), inherited his father's throne. Bindusara continued his father's military campaigns and further expanded the Mauryan Empire. Bindusara had a number of sons, including Asoka. Bindusara appointed Prince Asoka as the governor of an important province. Asoka must have shown promise as a ruler.

Bindusara apparently asked the young prince to put down disorders in another province governed by Asoka's older brother.

When Bindusara died, a period of turmoil followed. Evidently, Asoka and his brothers fought among themselves for title to the throne. With the support of his father's chief government ministers, Asoka took control of the empire. Four years later, in 269 B.C., Asoka was officially crowned king. He was about 35 years old.

Asoka's empire was divided into four provinces that were, in turn, subdivided into smaller regions. Government officials were appointed to maintain strict control and to collect tribute and taxes from each of these regions.

A special class of senior officials, called mahamattas, were responsible to the king for keeping the villages, regions, and provinces running efficiently. The king gave independent authority to judicial *mahamattas*. These judges presided over civil and criminal cases and had the power to inflict fines, lashings, and capital punishment for severe offenses. All officials were chosen for their loyalty and were usually appointed by the king.

Aśoka's reign is
organized and
brutal, with
appointed enforcers
in every region to
keep the peace.

Although Asoka came to the Mauryan throne at a time of peace and economic prosperity, the great diversity of peoples within the empire threatened disunity. Asoka needed a common code of behavior to bind everyone together.

keep reading below

The Enlightened One

Although the Hindu religion was dominant in India during Asoka's reign, a relatively new religion had begun to challenge the ancient Hindu beliefs. Siddhartha Gautama, called the *Buddha* ("Enlightened One"), lived in India two centuries earlier. Buddha taught that nonviolence, moderation in life, and dedication to the care of others led to enlightenment. He also questioned the need for the elaborate rituals in Hinduism and broke the caste rules by treating all people as equals. Siddhartha Gautama's followers were called *Buddhists*. After becoming a king, Asoka became a Buddhist.

Asoka's conversion to Buddhism may have influenced the way he chose to rule his kingdom. In the Mauryan Empire, the king's word was law. Asoka inherited absolute power. But Asoka chose to adopt a more

paternalistic, or fatherly role as ruler. "All men are my children," he wrote. Unlike many ancient rulers who adopted a new religion, Asoka did not establish Buddhism as a state religion or insist that his subjects convert to it.

Dhamma

Asoka undertakes a massive military battle on the kingdom of Kalinga.

During the ninth year of his reign, Asoka decided to follow in the path of his father and grandfather and go to war. He marched on Kalinga. The kingdom of Kalinga, located on the east coast of India, controlled major land and sea trade routes to the south. It was also one of the few regions in India that had never been conquered by the Mauryans.

Asoka apparently waged a war of annihilation on Kalinga. His warriors killed about 100,000 Kalingan soldiers in battles, and thousands of civilians suffered and died when the conquerors drove another 150,000 Kalingans from their homes.

Within several months of his victory, however, King Asoka made an amazing public declaration. He expressed sorrow and remorse for the slaughter and suffering that he had caused during his assault on Kalinga. He renounced wars of conquest. Although he retained his army, Asoka never went to war again.

What caused this dramatic turn in Asoka's life? During this period he was becoming a Buddhist, and the teachings of "The Enlightened One" must have had a profound effect on him. But there were other influences. Hindu, Jainist, and other religious thinkers, foreign visitors to the Mauryan capital, and personal remorse all seemed to contribute to Asoka's change of heart. King Asoka began to forge a set of ethics based on his new beliefs; he called this set of ethics *dhamma*.

After swearing off war and terror, Aśoka seeks a new kind of order for society, that of Dhamma/Dharma.

Pay attention to how Aśoka envisions the new order of society through the edicts.

To Asoka, dhamma was a way for people to treat each other and animals with respect. Dhamma was related to dharma, which is the fundamental law that Hindus, Buddhists, and Jainists believe applies to all beings.

Dhamma included such concepts as respect and compassion for others, fair treatment of all, benevolence, non-violence, religious toleration, helping the unfortunate, and the humane treatment of animals. "It is having few faults and many good deeds," Asoka wrote.

The Edicts of Asoka

Asoka went beyond simply preaching abstract ideas. He attempted to give practical guidance to his subjects in edicts that he ordered inscribed on rocks and stone pillars for all to see. Called the Rock and Pillar Edicts, these stone documents were written in the language of the common people. By making the edicts accessible to everyone, Asoka tried to bind together the diverse peoples of his empire while he gave them a uniquely practical and compassionate code of ethics to live by.

Referring to himself only by the royal title "Beloved of the Gods," Asoka addressed most of his edicts to the people of the empire. One of the edicts expressed Asoka's remorse for the suffering he had caused the people of Kalinga:

The edicts were basically lost and untranslatable until an English scholar James Prinsep was finally able to translate the rare script in 1847.

This is a translation of an edict inscription

On conquering Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, for when an independent country is conquered, the slaughter, death, and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods and weighs heavily on his mind. What is even more deplorable to the Beloved of the Gods is that those who dwell there . . . all suffer violence, murder, and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate to

edict inscription,
continued

have escaped . . . suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and relatives. This participation of all men in suffering weighs heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods.

In two special edicts, he called upon his mahamattas in Kalinga to administer justice impartially and to gain the affection of the people, whom he called "my children." Most of the other edicts dealt with the welfare and happiness of all people based on Asoka's conception of dhamma.

The following section summarizes a number of Asoka's edicts. The passages in quotations are translations of Asoka's own words.

"Thus speaks the Beloved of the Gods. . ."

Prohibitions

- No sacrifice of animals for religious rituals will be permitted in the capital.
- The slaughter and mutilation of specific animals and birds by anyone is forbidden.
- The king will no longer go on royal hunts.
- The king renounces victory by wars of conquest. The Beloved of the Gods considers victory by dhamma to be the foremost victory.

Public Works

- Hospitals for people and animals will be built.
- Gardens for growing medicinal plants will be established.

Which of these inscriptions deal with human-animal relations? What other overlaps or differences do you see with Aristotle's *Politics*?

Which of these inscriptions deal with human-animal relations? What other overlaps or differences do you see with Aristotle's *Politics*?

—Wells, trees, and rest houses will be put along roads for the comfort of travelers and animals.

Human Relations

—People should obey their parents and religious elders.

—People should not mistreat their servants and slaves.

—People should be generous to religious persons, relatives, and friends.

Religion

—Religious sects "may dwell in all places."

—People should not attack the religious beliefs of others "so that men may hear one another's principles."

Welfare of the People

—My officials will attend to the welfare of the aged, the poor, and prisoners.

—My officials who are reporting the public's business will have immediate access to me at all times and places.

—My officials will make sure that the government of the empire is run efficiently for the welfare and happiness of the people.

Justice

—Judges will be independent and will exercise uniformity in procedure and punishment.

—Wrongdoers should be forgiven as much as possible.

Which of these inscriptions deal with human-animal relations? What other overlaps or differences do you see with Aristotle's *Politics*?

—Capital punishment should be used with restraint and the condemned should have three days to appeal their sentence.

— "It is good not to kill living beings."

In his last edict, probably inscribed in 242 B.C., Asoka wrote: "The advancement of dhamma amongst men has been achieved through two means, laws and persuasion. But of these two, laws have been less effective and persuasion more so." Specially trained officials, called *dhamma-mahamattas* toured the empire regularly to assess the views of the people and to instruct them in the meaning of dhamma. King Asoka often toured with his dhamma-mahamattas. He also dispatched missionaries to foreign countries, "for I consider that I must promote the welfare of the whole world."

We know little about how thoroughly Asoka's edicts were accepted by his people. In his final inscriptions, titled "The Beloved of the Gods," Asoka seemed content that he had been successful. Asoka died in 232 B.C. after a reign of nearly 40 years. Apparently, Asoka's vision for a more humane world died with him. His successors ruled poorly, and the Mauryan Empire disintegrated and finally vanished in a little more than 50 years.

Asoka was largely forgotten until his rock and pillar inscriptions, which still exist today, were translated over 2,000 years later. While Asoka failed to change his world, most of his ideas proved to be timeless.

For Discussion and Writing

1. How were Asoka and Darius the Great different kinds of rulers? How were they similar?
2. How would you describe a person who lived his or her life according to dhamma?

Consider Qs 2 and 3

3. What do you think was the single most important idea in Asoka's edicts? Why? Do you think Asoka overlooked any important categories in his edicts?

For Further Reading

Nikam, N. A. and Richard McKeon, eds. *The Edicts of Asoka*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

Thapar, Romila. *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963.

ACTIVITY: What Is Dhamma Today?

1. Form small groups. Every group will write six of their own edicts, one for each of the six categories of Asoka's Edicts listed in the article. The edicts should concern issues of today relating to the categories, but must also conform to the principles of dhamma as explained by Asoka over 2,000 years ago.
2. The groups should inscribe their edicts on butcher paper and post them around the classroom.
3. The members of each group should then explain why their six edicts are an expression of dhamma today.