



## A study of Emperor Ashoka, Kalinga war and spread of Buddhism

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### ABSTRACT

Ashoka converted his foreign policy from expansionism to that of coexistence and peace with his neighbours — the avoidance of additional conquests making his empire easier to administer. In keeping with his Buddhism he announced that he was determined to ensure the safety, peace of mind and happiness of all “animate beings” in his realm. He announced that he would now strive for conquest only in matters of the human spirit and the spread of “right conduct” among people. And he warned other powers that he was not only compassionate but also powerful. Ashoka’s wish for peace was undisturbed by famines or natural disasters. His rule did not suffer from the onslaught of any great migration. And during his reign, no neighboring kings tried to take some of his territory — perhaps because these kings were accustomed to fearing the Maurya monarchs and thinking them strong. The resulting peace helped extend economic prosperity. Ashoka relaxed the harsher laws of his grandfather, Chandragupta. He gave up the kingly pastime of hunting game, and in its place he went on religious pilgrimages. He began supporting philanthropies. He proselytized for Buddhism, advocating non-violence, vegetarianism, charity and tenderness to all living things.

### INTRODUCTION

The second Mauryan emperor, Bindusara, ruled for twenty-five years. He warred occasionally, reinforcing his nominal authority within India, and he acquired the title “Slayer of Enemies.” Then in the year 273 BCE, he was succeeded by his son Ashoka, who in his first eight years of rule did what was expected of him: he looked after the affairs of state and extended his rule where he could. Around the year 260 Ashoka fought great battles and imposed his rule on people southward along the eastern coast of India — an area called Kalinga. The sufferings created by the war disturbed Ashoka. He found relief in Buddhism and became an emperor with values that differed from those of his father, grandfather and others. He was a Buddhist lay member and went on a 256-day pilgrimage to Buddhist holy places in northern India. Buddhism benefited from the association with state power that Hinduism had enjoyed and that Christianity would enjoy under Constantine the Great.

Like Jeroboam and other devout kings, Ashoka was no

revolutionary. Rather than India changing politically, Buddhism was changing. In the years to come, Ashoka mixed his Buddhism with material concerns that served the Buddha’s original desire to see suffering among people mitigated: Ashoka had wells dug, irrigation canals and roads constructed. He had rest houses built along roads, hospitals built, public gardens planted and medicinal herbs grown. But Ashoka maintained his army, and he maintained the secret police and network of spies that he had inherited as a part of his extensive and powerful bureaucracy. He kept his hold over Kalinga, and he did not allow the thousands of people abducted from Kalinga to return there. He announced his intention to “look kindly” upon all his subjects, as was common among kings, and he offered the people of Kalinga a victor’s conciliation, erecting a monument in Kalinga which read:

All men are my children, and I, the king, forgive what can be forgiven.

Ashoka converted his foreign policy from expansionism to that of coexistence and peace with his neighbors — the avoidance of additional conquests making his empire easier to

administer. In keeping with his Buddhism he announced that he was determined to ensure the safety, peace of mind and happiness of all “animate beings” in his realm. He announced that he would now strive for conquest only in matters of the human spirit and the spread of “right conduct” among people. And he warned other powers that he was not only compassionate but also powerful.

Ashoka’s wish for peace was undisturbed by famines or natural disasters. His rule did not suffer from the onslaught of any great migration. And during his reign, no neighboring kings tried to take some of his territory — perhaps because these kings were accustomed to fearing the Maurya monarchs and thinking them strong.

The resulting peace helped extend economic prosperity. Ashoka relaxed the harsher laws of his grandfather, Chandragupta. He gave up the kingly pastime of hunting game, and in its place he went on religious pilgrimages. He began supporting philanthropies. He proselytized for Buddhism, advocating non-violence, vegetarianism, charity and tenderness to all living things.

Ashoka had edicts cut into rocks and pillars at strategic locations throughout his empire, edicts to communicate to passers-by the way of compassion, edicts such as “listen to your father and mother,” and “be generous with your friends and relatives.” In his edicts he spread hope in the survival of the soul after death and in good behaviour leading to heavenly salvation. And in keeping with the change that was taking place in Buddhism, in at least one of his edicts Ashoka described Siddhartha Gautama not merely as the teacher that Siddhartha had thought of himself but as “the Lord Buddha.”

Ashoka called upon his subjects to desist from eating meat and attending illicit and immoral meetings. He ordered his local agents of various ranks, including governors, to tour their jurisdictions regularly to witness that rules of right conduct were being followed. He commanded the public to recite his edicts on certain days of the year.

Ashoka’s patronage of Buddhism gave it more respect, and in his empire Buddhism spread. More people became vegetarian, and perhaps there was some increase in compassion toward others. He was not championing the cause of a jealous god and was able to plead for tolerance toward Hindus and Jains. Mindful of the close ties between Buddhism and Hinduism he claimed that the Brahmin’s creed deserved respect, and he included Brahmins among his officials.

Not all Brahmins returned Ashoka’s kindness. They were displeased with Ashoka’s campaign against their sacrificial slaughtering of living creatures. But Ashoka’s opposition to such sacrifices did please many among India’s peasantry, whose flocks had long been plundered by local rulers seeking animals for their sacrifices.

Ashoka sent missionaries to the kingdoms of Southern India, to parts of Kashmir in the northwest, to Persia, Egypt

and Greece, but, as Christians were to learn, old habits are not easily broken. Buddhism outside his kingdom took root only on the island of Lanka.

India remained without unifying state institutions as a record of Ashoka’s rule. Work, taxation, class relations, government bureaucracy and village politics had changed little. Whether prostitution had ended is unknown. In religion, old habits continued among Buddhists, as they looked to Brahmins to conduct those rites associated with births, marriages and deaths. Ashoka attempted to resolve differences among the Buddhists — as the Christian emperor Constantine would among the Christians — but conflicts among the Buddhists remained and would grow.

In the final years of his reign, Ashoka withdrew from public life, and in 232 BCE — after thirty-seven years of rule — he died. Memory of his reign might have disappeared but for his sculpted pillars with his messages.

During the reign of his heirs the empire began to split apart, including the breaking away of Kalinga. Why this happened is unknown. Buddhist writings suggest that decay had come before Ashoka’s death. Some scholars attribute the decline to economic pressures: revenues from taxing agriculture and trade that were inadequate in maintaining the large military and army of bureaucrats. Perhaps palace politics reduced the ability of Ashoka’s heirs to govern. Perhaps Ashoka’s heirs inherited from Ashoka a pacifism that discouraged their using force in keeping the Mauryan empire together. Whatever the cause or causes, regions within the empire asserted their independence, and the empire disintegrated while the Maurya family, in Pataliputra, continued to rule.

### **A military coup and invasions:**

In 185 B.C., the rule of the Maurya family ended when an army commander-in-chief, Pusyamitra Sunga, murdered the last Maurya king during a parade of his troops. Pusyamitra’s rise to power has been described, perhaps inaccurately, as a reaction by Brahmins to the Buddhism of the Maurya family. Nevertheless, the influence of state power on religion continued, with Pusyamitra supporting orthodox Brahminism and appointing Brahmins to state offices. And, with Pusyamitra’s rule, animal sacrifices and other outlawed activities returned, including musical festivals and dances.

Then came invasions. Perhaps the collapse of the Maurya dynasty signaled to outsiders that India was now vulnerable — much as division after Alexander’s death had brought an assault by Celts. The first of the great invasions began roughly two years after Pusyamitra took power. The king of Bactria, Demetrius, followed the footsteps of Alexander through the Khyber Pass and extended his power into the northern Indus Valley, where he began what was to become a series of wars between the Greeks and Indians.

The Greeks brought with them a better coin than was

being used in India, which contributed to regional and inter-regional trade. They brought with them ideas in astronomy, architecture and art that spread through India, and with the new art came new depictions of Hindu gods and a new image of the Buddha.

Between the years 155 and 130, a Greek named Menander (known to Indians as Milinda) ruled in India's northwest. He sent his army into the Ganges Valley as far as Magadha's capital, Pataliputra. But, failing to capture that city, he returned to his kingdom in the northwest. In Pataliputra the Sunga dynasty, created by Pusyamitra Sunga, continued its rule.

Like Ashoka, Menander converted to Buddhism. This conversion may have facilitated the passage of Buddhist ideas west to Bactria and from Bactria farther west. The Greeks in India helped in spreading ideas westward. The road between India and Bactria had become a bridge to and from the West. To the Indus Valley came ideas from Zoroastrianism, and in India arose the belief in a savior who at the end of time would lead the forces of light and goodness in a final victory against the forces of darkness and evil.

#### **Scythian and Kushan invasions:**

Those herdsmen whom the Chinese called Xiongnu expanded against Indo-European speaking tribes called the Yüeh Chih — also called Kushans. The Kushans pushed against Scythians, who migrated from their homeland in Central Asia into an area southeast of the Caspian Sea, an area to become known as Parthia. From 141 to 128 BCE the Scythians were able to expand into a lush, agricultural area, Bactria, against the Greeks there, who were already weakened by warfare. Soon thereafter, the Kushans invaded Bactria. Then around 50 BCE, the Parthian empire — which in Persia had replaced the power of the Seleucid dynasty — invaded northwestern India. And also invading India were the Scythians from Bactria.

The last of the Greek kings in India, Hermaeus, tried unsuccessfully to defend his rule from these attacks. In the Indus Valley, Greeks, Scythians and Parthians fought into the first century CE, and the Scythians extended their rule into north-central India and south along India's western coast, to the Gulf of Cambay. They ended Greek rule in India but maintained the Indo-Greek culture, some of which they had acquired in Bactria. In India, the Scythians became known as *Sakas*. Like other conquerors, the Sakas kept the local royalty as their subordinates. And Saka rulers became known as *Satrapas*.

In the middle of the first century CE, another tribe of Kushans left Bactria and moved into northwest India. After a generation or more a Kushan named Kanishka became the greatest of the Kushan kings. He expanded his rule from Bactria to the center of the Ganges valley and south along the Indus River to the Arabian Sea, and like the Saka rulers he absorbed lesser kings and made them sub-rulers.

#### **Trade, prosperity and cultural diffusions:**

The centuries of invasions were dark times for much of India, but not so for the southern part of the sub-continent, which was peopled by Dravidians. Unlike other Dark Ages, during the period of invasions into India much of its roads and ports were maintained. Southern India benefited from expanded economic and cultural contacts with the world outside India and an expanded trade with West Asia and the Roman Empire. The south had become the most prosperous part of India. Leaving southern ports were ivory, onyx, cotton goods, silks, pepper and other spices, and from the Roman empire the Indians imported tin, lead, antimony and wine.

Indian ships sailed south to Lanka and then east to Southeast Asian ports, where Indian merchants sold cotton cloth, ivory, brass wear, monkeys, parrots and elephants to Chinese merchants, who transported their goods by sea to China. From Southeast Asian ports Indian merchants acquired spices that they traded elsewhere. Trade between India and China passed also across Central Asia by camel caravan, across what would become known as the great northern silk route, China sending musk, raw and woven silk, tung oil and amber westward into India.

Accompanying this seagoing trade, wave after wave of Indians emigrated. These colonists reached Lanka, the coast of Burma, what is now Thailand and Cambodia, the Malay Peninsula, Java, Sumatra and Borneo, and a few reached Taiwan and the Philippines.

In India, meanwhile, the increase in India's trade led to the rise of bankers and financiers among the Indians, and these men of wealth gave support to monarchies and landlords short on cash. Families in banking and commerce extended their enterprises into as many urban centers as they could, in India and abroad. And the increase in trade brought a rise in intellectual activity among the Indians — as it had among the Greeks. Science and the arts flourished, stimulated too by ideas that the Greeks brought from Bactria.

#### **Kanishka's empire and Buddhism:**

Like tribal people before them — and like the Germans who would invade the Roman Empire — Kanishka and the Kushans adopted aspects of the civilization they had conquered. Kanishka's empire prospered economically, and it is said that to his court, from all over Asia, the wealth and wisdom of Kanishka attracted merchants, artists, poets and musicians. Like other barbarian rulers, Kanishka found Buddhism more accessible than Hinduism. Kanishka became a patron of Buddhism, and Buddhists would rank him as one of their own and with Ashoka and Menander as a great king. Kanishka would remain attached to warfare for the remainder of his life, while his attachment to Buddhism remained an ideal separate from the struggle over power.

Kanishka was eclectic in religion. He appears also to have

been inclined toward the Persian cult of Mithras, to Zoroastrianism, and to have also worshiped Greek and Hindu deities. Buddhism dominated in the cities of Kanishka's empire and in Kanishka's court, while through his empire Brahmin families maintained orthodox Hinduism.

Kanishka is said to have been attempting to reconcile Hinduism and Buddhism. And he convened a Buddhist council in Kashmir — much as the emperor Constantine would call a council of Christians — in hope of resolving conflict that had developed among Buddhists: between Mahayana Buddhism, meaning the Great Vehicle, and Hinayana Buddhism, the Little Vehicle. Hinayana Buddhism was mainly in the southern half of India.

### **The Gupta dynasty and empire:**

India's so-called Dark Age — from 185 B.C. to 300 B.C. — was not dark regarding trade. Disintegration of the Mauryan Empire and the invasions were mitigated by a continuing trade in which Indians sold more to the Roman Empire than they bought, with Roman coins piling up in India. The Kushan invaders were absorbed by India, Kushan kings adopting the manners and language of the Indians and intermarrying with Indian royal families. The southern kingdom of Andhra conquered Magadha in 27 B.C., ending the rule Sunga dynasty there, and it extended its power in the Ganges Valley, creating a new bridge between the north and the south. But this came to an end as Andhra and two other southern kingdoms weakened themselves by warring against one another. By the early 300s, power in India was returning to the Magadha region, and India was entering what would be called its classical age.

Magadha raja named Chandra Gupta — who was unrelated to the Chandragupta of six centuries before — controlled rich veins of iron from the nearby Barabara Hills. Around the year 308 he married a princess from the neighboring kingdom of Licchavi, and with this marriage he gained a hold over the flow of northern India's commerce on the Ganges River — the major flow of north Indian commerce. In 319 B.C., Chandra Gupta created for himself the title King of Kings (*Maharajadhiraja*), and he extended his rule westward to Prayaga, in north-central India.

Ten years into his rule, Chandra Gupta lay dying, and he told his son, Samudra, to rule the whole world. His son tried. Samudra Gupta's forty-five years of rule would be described as one vast military campaign. He waged war along the Ganges plain, overwhelming nine kings and incorporating their subjects and lands into the Gupta Empire. He absorbed Bengal, and kingdoms in Nepal and Assam paid him tribute. He expanded his empire westward, conquering Malava and the Saka kingdom of Ujjayini. He gave various tribal states autonomy under his protection. He raided Pallava and humbled eleven kings in southern India. He made a vassal of the king of Lanka, and he compelled five kings on the outskirts of his empire to pay him

tribute. The powerful kingdom of Vakataka in central India, he preferred to leave independent and friendly.

Around 380, Samudra Gupta was succeeded by his son Chandra Gupta II, and Chandra Gupta II extended Gupta rule to India's west coast, where new ports were helping India's trade with countries farther west. His rule influenced local powers beyond the Indus River and north to Kashmir. While Rome was being overrun and the western half of the Roman Empire was disintegrating, Gupta rule was at the apex of its grandeur, prospering in agriculture, crafts and trade. Unlike the Mauryas, who had controlled trade and industry, the Guptas let people free to pursue wealth and business, and prosperity in the Gupta era exceeded that of the Mauryan era. Like the Cynics during Rome's golden age, a few ascetics entertained pessimistic views of life, and maintained that asceticism would benefit all of humanity. But many Indians were pursuing pleasure and enjoying life. In the cities were wealthy and middle class people who enjoyed their gardens, music, dancing, plays and various other entertainment. They enjoyed a daily bath, artistic and social activities and a variety of food, including rice, bread, fish, milk, fruits and juices. And despite religious prohibitions, the Indians — especially the aristocrats — drank wine and stronger alcoholic beverages.

Greater wealth accrued to those who already had wealth, and the middle class prospered. Big estates grew with the help of dependent labor and slave labor. The poor stayed poor, but apparently there was little dire want. The caste system still existed. So too did the inferior status of women. But charities abounded. The Gupta kings were autocrats who liked to think of themselves as servants to all their subjects. Hospitals offered care free of charge to everyone, rich and poor. There were rest houses for travelers along India's highways, and the capital possessed an excellent, free hospital created by the charity of the wealthy.

Although the Gupta's were more organized in their administrations, with the increase in prosperity had come a greater liberality. The cruel punishments of Mauryan times had been abolished. People no longer had to register with government authorities or carry a passport when traveling within the empire. The government operated without the system of espionage often practiced by Roman emperors and by Mauryan rulers. Law breaking was punished without death sentences — mainly by fines. Punishments such as having one's hand cut off were applied only against obstinate, professional criminals.

Among civilians, the avoidance of killing that had been a part of Buddhism and Jainism was widely observed. Across India most people had become vegetarians, except for fish which was widely consumed in Bengal and places to its south. And unlike parts of the Roman Empire, a traveler in India had little reason to fear robbery. A visitor from China, Fa-hien (Faxian), traveled about in India for eleven years and recorded that he

was never molested or robbed.

With the good times came an intellectual revival. Literature flourished, and Indians exercised their proficiency in art, architecture and mathematics. It was now that India's greatest poet and dramatist, Kalidasa, lived. He and other writers acquired fame expressing the values of the rich and powerful.

#### **Decline and fall:**

Chandra Gupta II died in 415 B.C. and was succeeded by his son, Kumara Gupta, who maintained India's peace and prosperity. During his forty-year reign the Gupta Empire remained undiminished. Then — as was the Roman Empire around this time — India suffered more invasions. Kumara Gupta's son, the crown prince, Skanda Gupta, was able to drive the invaders, the Hephthalites, back, into the Sassanian Empire, where they were to defeat the Sassanid army and kill the Sassanid king, Firuz.

In India, women and children sang praises to Skanda Gupta. Skanda Gupta succeeded his father in 455 B.C.. Then the Hephthalites returned, and he spent much of his reign of twenty-five years combating them, which drained his treasury and weakened his empire. Skanda Gupta died in 467 B.C., and after a century and a half the cycle of rise and disintegration of empire turned again to disintegration. Contributing to this was dissention within the royal family. Benefiting from this dissention, governors of provinces and feudal chieftains

revolted against Gupta rule. For a while the Gupta Empire had two centers: at Valabhi on the western coast and at Pataliputra toward the east. Seeing weakness, the Hephthalites invaded India again — in greater number. Just before the year 500 B.C., the Hephthalites took control of the Punjab. After 515 B.C., they absorbed the Kashmir, and they advanced into the Ganges Valley, the heart of India, raping, burning, massacring, blotting out entire cities and reducing fine buildings to rubble. Provinces and feudal territories declared their independence, and the whole of north India became divided among numerous independent kingdoms. And with this fragmentation India was again torn by numerous small wars between local rulers.

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