

Asoka: Ruthless Conqueror or Enlightened Ruler?

The nation of India gained its independence from Great Britain in 1947. The Indian people were proud to regain self-rule and, like people in other nations, they wanted their own flag. They looked to their past – way back, over 2,000 years – to find a design that represented their culture and values.



The symbol they chose was a wheel-shaped image called the Asoka Chakra. Its 24 spokes stand for the hours in a day and the fact that life is ever-changing. The circular hub in the center represents the permanence of truth, the belief that while change is necessary, we must never lose touch with what is forever true.

The chakra (to the left) was named for Asoka ('a-sho-ka'), who ruled most of what later became India from 268 B.C. until his death in 232 B.C. In many ways, he is the founding father of India. As a warrior, he conquered valuable territory that remains part of India today. As a ruler, he introduced a form of government, based in Buddhist spiritual belief, that has been an important guide to the nation and too many people throughout the world.

As prince of the Mauryan Empire, Asoka reportedly led a lavish lifestyle, enjoying expensive horses and great feasts. However, Asoka also had a serious side and was known to be very interested in nature and spiritual matters. Asoka became ruler of the Mauryan Empire when he was in his thirties and, within ten years, extended its territory by conquering the region of Kalinga on the southeast coast of India.

After adding Kalinga to the Mauryan Empire, Asoka continued his spiritual transformation. He became a Buddhist and worked to spread the beliefs of that faith throughout the region, while still honoring the traditions of the Hindu majority in India (Hinduism).

He sent missionaries to other lands and carved royal messages on numerous stone monuments that served as ancient-era billboards across the empire. These edicts (to the right) were written on pillars, boulders, and walls in different languages so that Asoka's subjects could understand the principles that guided his rule.



The Mauryan Empire collapsed about 50 years after Asoka's death, but his impact on India remained powerful. It became even stronger in the 19th century, when many of the edicts were

rediscovered and translated by modern scholars. Asoka's legacy also played a key role in India's fight for independence from British rule. To Indians then and now, Asoka was a giant – a warrior and ruler beyond any in their history!

There is no question that Asoka has helped to form India's sense of identity; the adoption of his symbol on the Indian flag 2,000 years after his death is evidence of that. But what about Asoka's own identity? We know from his own words that at times he was a troubled man. As he grew older, he was apparently haunted by some of his early deeds as a warrior and emperor. Like many who have made a large impact on the world, Asoka's story has both its dark sides and its light sides. Which side should history remember?

Questions – underline in the text where you find the answer

1. In what year did Asoka assume control of the Mauryan Empire?

2. What faith did Asoka adopt during his rule?

3. What caused Asoka's edicts to become a focus of study in the past 150 years?

4. Why can Asoka's history be described as 'written in stone'?

5. Define:

- Chakra - _____
- Buddhist - _____
- Transformation - _____
- Missionaries - _____
- Edicts - _____