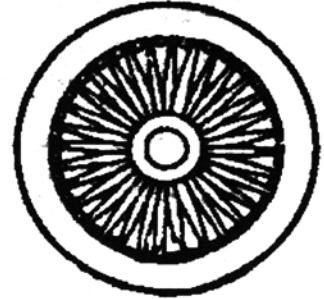


RAJA ASHOKA



In your opinion, what are the qualities a good king should possess? Have you ever heard or read about a good king?

You have seen these two pictures many times before. Where have you seen them? Can you identify them?



KING ASHOKA OF MAGADHA

Many years ago, about 200 years after the death of Gautama Buddha, there lived a king called Ashoka. He was the king of Magadha and the capital of his kingdom was called Pataliputra.

Ashoka erected tall pillars made of polished stone in many parts of his kingdom. These pillars were inscribed with his messages to the people. They were crowned with statues of either a bull, an elephant or a lion.

Some of these pillars had statues of four lions. Beneath the four lions was a wheel. You might have noticed the picture of this very statue on the coins, notes and other official documents of the Government of India. The wheel is similar to the one on our national flag. These emblems of Ashoka are to this day considered to be our national symbols.

• What is unique about Ashoka that he is remembered and considered important even today? Can you think of a couple of reasons for his greatness?

An Important and Powerful King

When Ashoka ascended the throne, his kingdom extended far and wide. His father Bindusara had conquered many parts of South India. His grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya, had earlier established his **suzerainty** over many parts of northern and western India.

Chandragupta had defeated Alexander's general, Seleucus Nikator and thus prevented the Greek empire from expanding further.

Ashoka's grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya was aided in his conquests by the advice of a very clever brahmin called Chanakya. It was with Chanakya's assistance that he evolved a system to govern his vast kingdom.

In this manner, Ashoka inherited a vast empire from his father and grandfather. Ashoka too waged a mighty war against the independent *janapada* of Kalinga on the eastern borders of his kingdom. On defeating Kalinga, he merged it with his kingdom.

If you look at Map 7, you can see that Ashoka ruled over the major part of what is

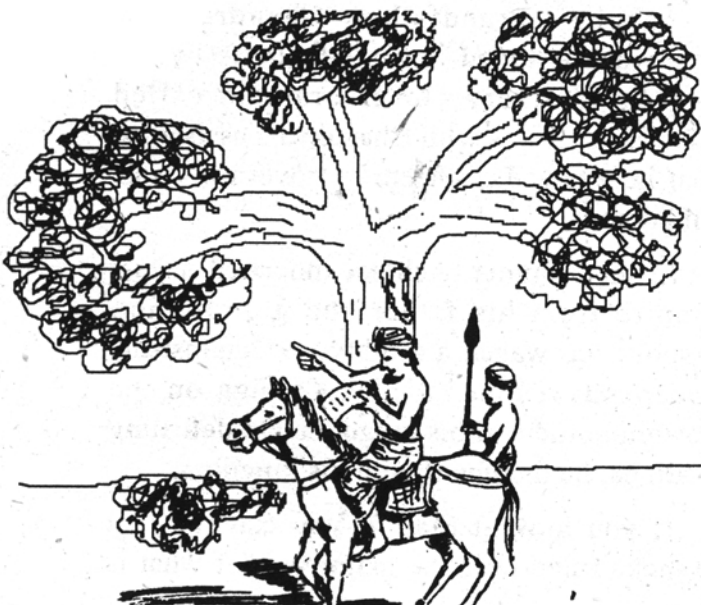
modern India today and many parts beyond its present boundaries.

- *Parts of which modern countries fall within the boundaries of Ashoka's empire? Colour those portions of modern India which were not part of his empire.*
- *Did any other king before Ashoka have such a large empire? Examine the maps given in the previous chapters to answer this question.*
- *Can you imagine what might have been the benefits and problems in having such a large empire?*

Ashoka's empire was very extensive, but many parts of it were covered with dense forests. Many of these jungles were inhabited by hunter-gatherers. In some areas there were also settlements of people who cleared and cultivated patches of land in the forests.

The Authority of the King in Distant Regions

The king appointed his own officials and employees in villages and towns which had dense settlements of people. These officials collected taxes from the peasants, artisans and traders in their region. They meted out punishment to those who disobeyed the orders of the king. They kept the king, who lived in distant Pataliputra, informed about rebellious



talk in his kingdom. The king also kept a watchful eye on the officials working in distant areas.

His four princes lived in the four regions of his kingdom. These princes lived in the major cities of these regions- Takshashila in the north, Ujjayini in the west, Suvarnagiri in the south and Tosali in the east. Identify these cities on the map. These princes administered the surrounding regions from these four cities.

Some of Ashoka's important officials toured the empire and took care of its governance. These officers were called *Mahamatras*.

Ashoka too often toured the far flung regions of his empire. He inscribed his edicts and messages on rocks and pillars in several places across his vast empire. These were addressed to his officials and subjects and were in the common language spoken by his subjects - Prakrit. We learn many things about the time of Ashoka from these inscriptions on pillars and rocks.

The Mauryan empire under Ashoka was very powerful. Taxes were collected from lakhs of people inhabiting this far flung empire. Thousands of officials, soldiers and generals in the service of the king were paid salaries. But the highest authority rested with the king.

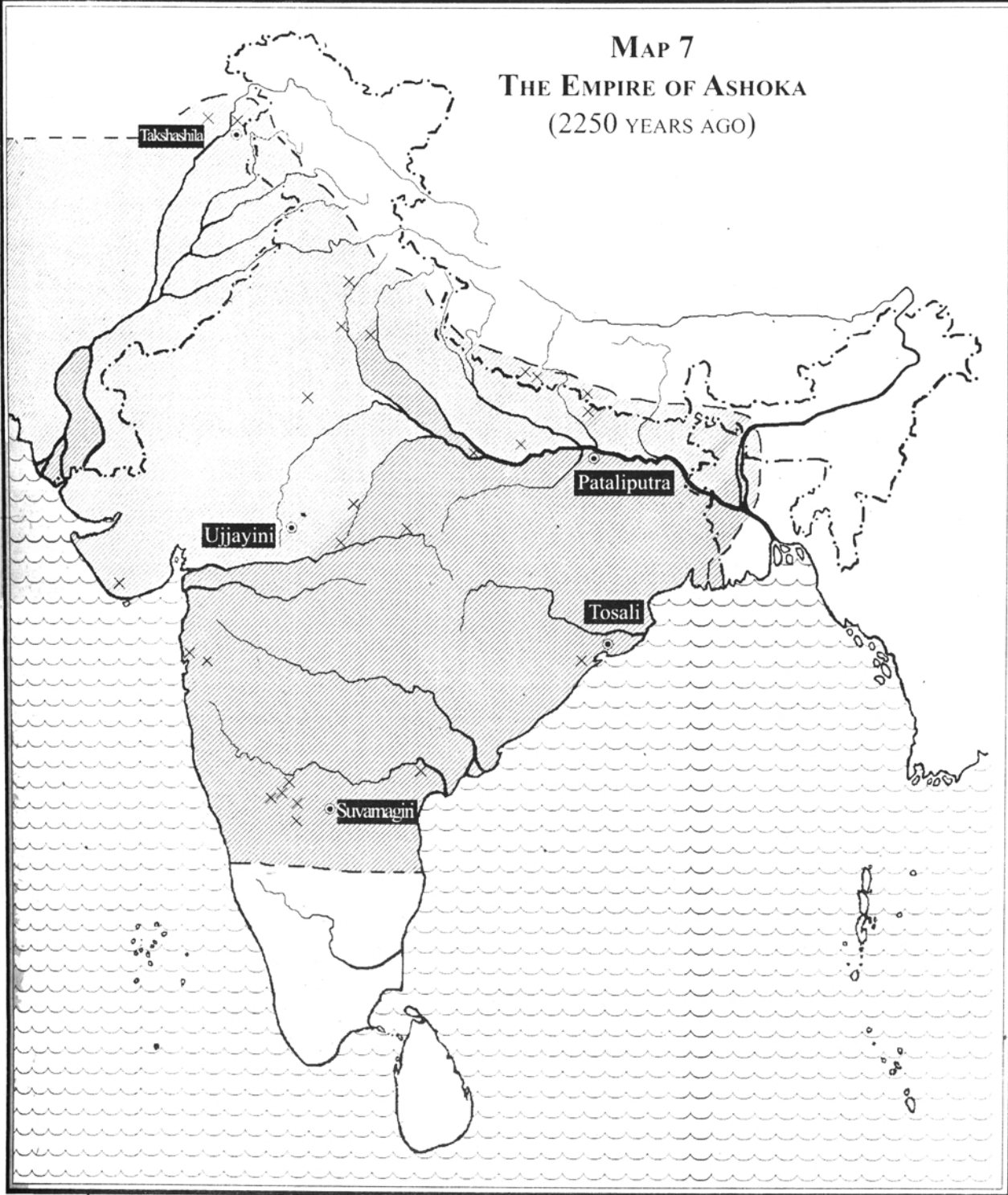
- *How did Ashoka control his vast empire? Which of these methods are used even today?*

But these are not the reasons why we remember Ashoka today. Ashoka is remembered not only for his powerful empire but because he cared for the welfare of his people and spread the message of peace, love and compassion for fellow beings.

The Final Battle

Ashoka made a decision which kings seldom make. After defeating the Kalinga *janapada* in a battle he decided never to wage another war if it could be avoided. He was extremely disturbed by the amount of bloodshed

MAP 7
THE EMPIRE OF ASHOKA
(2250 YEARS AGO)



Based upon Survey of India outline map printed in 1987.

The territorial waters of India extend into the sea to a distance of twelve nautical miles measured from the appropriate base line.

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Some of the places where Ashoka's inscriptions have been found	X	The present international boundaries of India	-----
		Sea	~~~~~
Empire of Ashoka	▨	Cities	●

and misery he witnessed in the Kalinga war.

He pondered deeply on the mindless destruction caused by wars. Kings usually take pride in defeating an enemy and conquering their kingdoms. But Ashoka was distressed and filled with remorse and sorrow. He decided to eschew wars in future and also decided to do only such work as would better the lot of his subjects. He put these thoughts down in one of his rock inscriptions :

"I defeated Kalinga eight years after becoming the king.

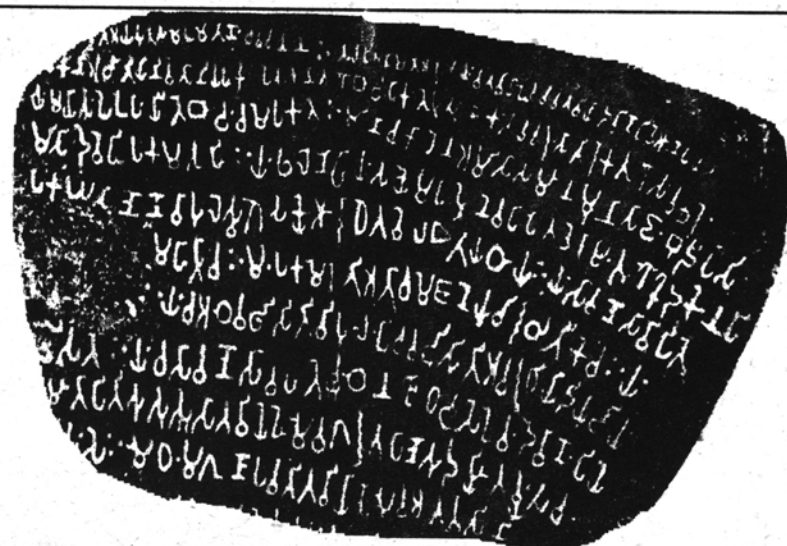
1,50,000 people have been exiled from the country and over 1,00,000 people have been killed.

This has distressed me considerably. Why should this happen? When an independent janapada is defeated in war, lakhs of its inhabitants are killed, made prisoners or driven out of their country. Brahmins and Shramanas living there are also killed.

Peasants who behave with humility towards their friends, servants and labourers are killed in wars and separated from their loved ones.

The ill-effects of war touch all kinds of people. I am extremely disturbed. After this war I have directed all my energies towards dhamma and I have taught others also to do so.

I accept that the triumph of dhamma is superior to the triumph of war. I inscribe these words so that my children and grandchildren eschew thoughts of war and devote their energies to the pursuit and spread of dhamma."



An inscription of Ashoka inscribed on a rock in Karnataka

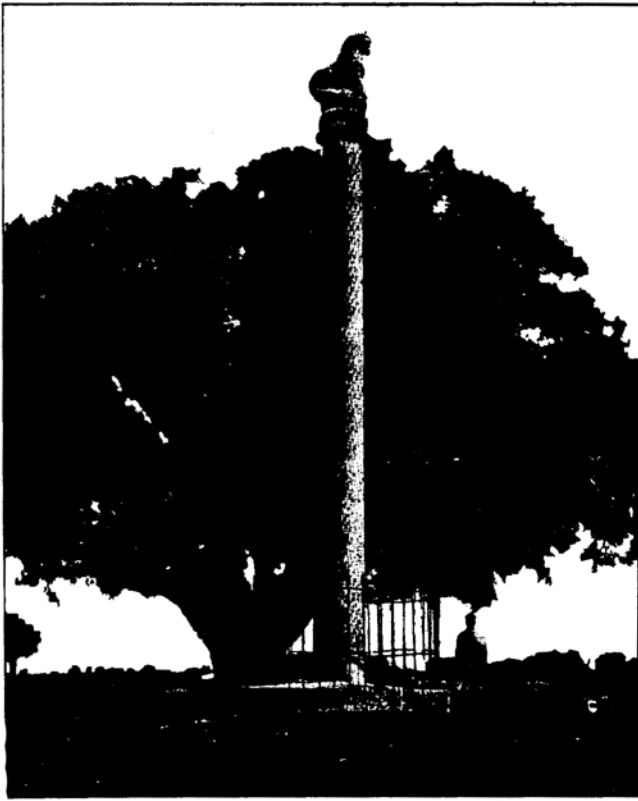
- How did Ashoka feel after his victory over Kalinga?
- Which other people were spreading the message of non-violence and compassion for fellow beings in those days?
- Would Ashoka have kept to his pledge to refrain from war if his kingdom had been surrounded by powerful enemies?
- What do you think are the positive aspects of Ashoka's policies?

Ashoka's Dhamma

Let us take a look at the *dhamma* that Ashoka sought to spread after renouncing war. This *dhamma* did not propound ritualised worship and sacrifices to any god or saint.

Ashoka began to think of his subjects as his children. A father teaches his children what is right and always seeks their welfare. Similarly, a king should teach his subjects the right way to behave and should always strive for their well-being.

Ashoka saw that people were unhappy with animal sacrifices, that slaves and labourers were not merely hungry and miserable, but were also abused and beaten by their masters. He noticed that people had different ideas about faith and religion and that these differences gave rise to conflicts, arguments and bitterness. People lied to each other, deceived each other and were immersed in the pursuit of wealth by any means.



An Ashokan Pillar from Bihar state

Ashoka pondered over these matters and concluded that the duty of a king is to show his subjects the correct path of life. He appointed special officials for this purpose. These officials were called *Dhamma Mahamatras*, and their job was to tour the towns and villages and teach people the right conduct. He inscribed his thoughts and messages on many rocks and pillars.

Let us examine some of Ashoka's preachings :

"1. No living creature shall be killed for sacrificial purposes. Formerly, scores of animals used to be slaughtered daily to provide meat to the king's kitchens. But now, only three animals are being killed - two peacocks and one deer. In future, even these shall not be killed.

2. People follow various rituals and customs at different times - when someone falls ill, when boys and girls marry, when a

child is born, when they undertake a journey etc. Women, especially, observe many such meaningless rituals.

These religious rituals can doubtless be performed, but one cannot expect to gain much from them. But there are other rituals and customs which are more beneficial. What are these? Respect for elders, behaving kindly towards slaves and labourers, treating all living creatures well and giving alms to brahmins and shramanas.

3. There should be restraint in preaching one's faith. Exaggerating the virtues of one's faith, or belittling the faith of others are both wrong. One should respect others' faiths at all times and in all ways.

A person who praises his own faith and derides the faith of others is actually bringing his faith into disrepute. Thus one must strive to understand the main teachings of each faith and respect them."

What do you think about these subjects? Discuss amongst yourselves.

Ashoka conveyed his messages to other kings as well and sought to befriend them. His envoys travelled with his messages to Greece, Egypt, Turkey and Sri Lanka.

Ashoka himself became a follower of Buddhism. He extended all help to the Buddhist *Sangha*. He even visited the birth place of Gautama Buddha. (This place, called Lumbinivana, is situated in present-day Nepal.) He abolished the *bali* tax levied on the people of Lumbini village.

Despite being a follower of Buddhism, Ashoka extended support to other faiths and made donations to them. He repeatedly

emphasised to his subjects the need to understand the teachings of all religions, and to refrain from denigrating any particular religion. He also entreated his people to give alms to brahmins and shramanas (or monks).

In addition to preaching to his people, Ashoka also wanted to work for their welfare. He constructed roads in many places, planted shady and fruit-bearing trees on either side and dug wells after every mile or so, and

constructed *dharamshalas* so that weary travellers could rest. He wanted to use the wealth of his kingdom in this manner to help his subjects.

- *In what ways was Ashoka different from other kings who lived and ruled before him?*
- *Why do you think people remember him to this day?*

EXERCISES

1. Can you point out any two decisions taken by Ashoka to lessen or completely do away with violence?
2. How did Ashoka try to influence people after deciding to forsake war for ever?
3. Did Ashoka become a weak king after deciding never to go to war again? Explain your thoughts on this issue.
4. Compare the maps on page 51 and 67 and point out the differences in the information contained in them.
5. Many years separate the age of the hunter-gatherers from the advent of Ashoka.
 - a. What are all the events which occurred during this period? Arrange the following in their proper chronological order - The cities of the Indus Valley; the Buddha; the beginning of agriculture; *mahajanapadas*; Ashoka; hunter-gatherers; small *janapadas*; pastoral Aryans.
 - b. Which of these periods bears the most similarity to the modern world and why?

ASHOKAN ROCK AND PILLAR INSCRIPTIONS IN MADHYA PRADESH

In Sehore district, lies the village of Panguraria, quite close to the Narmada. The forested hill behind this village has a rock shelter, the walls of which are covered with paintings done by hunting-gathering people. To one side of the wall of this cave, there is also an inscription carrying a message of Ashoka. The writing is visible and can be read even to this day.

How did Ashoka's message penetrate till here? The answer lies with the Buddhist monks of that period. They had built their monastery and stupas on the hill behind the village. Today, only their ruins remain. Stupas are mounds built over the remains of the Buddha and other respected monks. Perhaps one of Ashoka's sons or some mahamatras had brought his message to the Buddhist monks on the banks of the Narmada. Ashokan inscriptions have also been found near Rupnath in Jabalpur district and in a place called Gujjarra.

You must have heard about Sanchi and its famous stupa. The construction of this stupa began in the reign of Ashoka. Near this stupa stands a tall polished pillar with an Ashokan inscription. This pillar was originally crowned with a capital with four lions, but this huge sculpture is now kept in a museum.

Ashokan Inscription in Panguraria

