

Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor

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In the year 321 BC a powerful chieftain, known to history as Chandragupta Maurya, came to the throne of Magadha, one of the many north Indian states, in a part of India that is now known as Bihar. By the time his reign ended in c.299 BC he had not only established the supremacy of Magadha among all the rival states but had also defeated a Greek general, Selucus Nicator, who claimed large parts of Northwest India for his Selucid empire that emerged from the Greek control there originally established by Alexander the Great during his invasion of that region in 327 BC. Chandragupta's territories were consolidated under his grandson, Ashoka, into a great empire, traditionally known as the Mauryan Empire, which included practically the whole of the Indian subcontinent and eastern Afghanistan.⁽¹⁾

Ashoka, the third Mauryan, ruled between 269 BC and 233 BC. Like many an egocentric and despotic rulers then and now, his main interest at first was to secure by force complete domination over the entire subcontinent. He inflicted a most savage and cruel defeat on the peoples of an eastern region, Kalinga (modern Indian state of Orissa), which had escaped Mauryan control. Yet, remarkably, after having seen so much death and destruction on the battlefield, he felt acute remorse and yearned to achieve inner self-purification by following the twin principles of Buddhism: non-violence and compassion. Buddhism was, around this period of time, beginning to challenge the orthodoxies of Vedic Brahmanic Hinduism.⁽²⁾ While not completely abandoning his role as a strong Mauryan ruler, Ashoka decided on establishing throughout his empire a *Dhamma* or a universal moral law based upon the Buddha's teachings. His method of propagating these teachings was by inscribing major and minor edicts on the faces of cliffs, huge weather-worn rocks and pillars. The language of the edicts was Prakrit, a non-standard vernacular language of north India at that time, written in two of the earliest Indic scripts: *Brahmi* and *Kharoshti*. The edicts emphasise

the virtues of tolerance, non-violence and togetherness; they preach to the people the importance of such humane practices as looking after and comforting sick humans and animals, building roads and wells, planting trees, showing hospitality to strangers and foreigners. Ashoka refused to spare himself from rigorous introspection and self-analysis; and in one of the pillar edicts he admitted that he had himself not been free from evil.(3) He further spread the message of the Buddha by sending missionaries to places like Sri Lanka, supporting Buddhist monks along with the Brahman priests and convening a great Buddhist Council of monks.(4)

One would justifiably presume that a king such as Ashoka, who idealised compassion not conflict (albeit after his Kalinga war) and humane values rather than authoritarianism, would be a celebrated figure in the history of India. Such was not the case, however, for more than 20 centuries after his death. He came to be better known only during the 20th century. In the western world, for example, H. G. Wells's fulsome praise of Ashoka in his worldwide bestseller, *The Outline of History*, first published in London in 1920, might have impacted on the consciousness of readers. Why Ashoka featured so slightly for such a long time in the long history of India may be explained by a number of relevant factors. Firstly, although Buddhism remained a vibrant religious force in India for another seven or eight centuries after Ashoka, it always faced pressure from a Hinduism that every so often emerged from the shadows and asserted itself, thus eroding Buddhist confidence.(5) While the Buddha himself became part and parcel of the iconography of Hindu deities, his religion came to be received with greater warmth abroad rather than in its homeland. The gems of Buddhist literature came to be nurtured in Sri Lanka, for example; and it was in that very literature that Ashoka was most respected and venerated. Secondly, whatever was left of the legacy of Buddhism within India came under ferocious assault from the early iconoclastic Turco-Afghan invaders from the 11th and 12th centuries onwards.(6) Thirdly, since India's climate shows little mercy to both manuscripts and monuments, much had therefore been lost over the centuries. Some of the edicts inscribed on the rocks and pillars had nevertheless managed to survive and were there for interested observers or travellers but, since Indian scripts had long moved on since Ashoka's days and had evolved into something very different, no one in India could make any sense of Ashoka's message in *Brahmi* or *Kharoshti* scripts. Fourthly, while early Indian historical concerns are evident in both historical consciousness and historical traditions as represented by many and varied literary texts such as the great epics or the Puranas, it would not be an exaggeration to maintain that history had held out little fascination or interest for scholars in the Hindu world. Ancient Hindus displayed both talent and originality in their approach to such systematic studies as mathematics, grammar, logic or astronomy, yet they produced no outstanding historian who could interpret secular evidence to explain a historical story.(7) For all these reasons both the Buddha and Ashoka remained figures of mystery in India.

The fog that had clouded historical understanding for so long lifted with the arrival of British orientalist in the late 18th century. From that time onwards the East India Company became more than a trading corporation; it started ruling over Indian territories, starting with Bengal. The Company needed to have greater and more certain knowledge of India and her culture if it was to succeed in ruling over its people.(8) Its first great Governor-General, Warren Hastings, being Indophile in cultural sentiments, encouraged fine minds from Britain to come and work in India.(9) Many of them were administrators and military men, but some among them brought a passion for scholarship and research into varied branches of Indology. Through their efforts the British Empire of India became more than a tool of economic exploitation; it also became an empire of knowledge. Their most profound contribution to India was in the field of history, unearthing and revealing her past through their manifold skills. This story of exploration was concisely narrated by John Keay over a decade ago in his accessible *India Discovered: the Recovery of a Lost Civilization*.(10) Charles Allen's remarkable study, *Ashoka*, reviewed here, is a more detailed study of the ancient Indian monarch.

All of Charles Allen's books reflect his great passion for the British Raj in all its glory. His early *Plain Tales from the Raj* became world famous, and he has been a master story teller of the great historical dramas of British India. In all his works there is to be found that sense of wonder and astonishment at what the British achieved in India. With six generations of his family having served the Raj, his admiration and hero-worship of British characters in India is palpable. The story of the discovery of Ashoka has indeed given him further scope to bring to the attention of the world the achievements of British scholarship in India. The story

becomes more exciting when one considers that progress in the discovery of Ashoka went hand in hand with that for the discovery of the historical Buddha himself. The uncovering of the true figures of both the Buddha and Ashoka out of a mass of traditions and narratives owed to the same literary or archaeological sources worked upon by the same British orientalists. Allen's *Ashoka* is therefore best considered as a sequel to his equally enthralling earlier work, *The Buddha and the Sahibs*.⁽¹¹⁾ In both these works Allen displays a formidable range of research, forensic skills and clear articulation.

Reading Allen's graphic account, one is struck by an amazing range of qualities that the early orientalists brought to their formidable task. None knew the languages of India before they arrived, but the most assiduous of them, like William Jones, lost no time in searching out the learned Brahmin *pandits* for language tuition.⁽¹²⁾ Travelling long distances and observing the landscape, fauna, flora and the people, the orientalists kept detailed notes in diaries and log books; they took enormous physical risks to search out remote rocks and pillars that carried Ashoka's inscriptions. They were also collectors of ancient accounts from abroad, whether from Sri Lanka or China, and studied them with diligence. Since many of them had originally trained as army engineers or draughtsmen, their first instinct on coming across any inscription was to prepare a meticulous line drawing; and the vast collection of these line drawings are a fundamental primary data of Indian history of the period. The science of archaeology was quite rudimentary in the early 19th century, yet the explorers worked efficiently with simple tools, taking great care. They were up against other British administrators devoid of historical sensitivity or Indian developers and looters who helped themselves to bricks and stones for their own benefit, yet they somehow managed to safeguard essential ruins and artefacts. They were not devoid of personal jealousies and competitiveness and, despite Professor Edward Said's negative characterisation of European orientalists in general ⁽¹³⁾, those working in India in the late 18th and early 19th centuries were dedicated men whose efforts gave the Indians something to be proud about: a meaningful sense of their history.

Of the many remarkable orientalists introduced to the reader the first and the most illustrious one was Sir William Jones (1749–95), the great linguist and polymath. He was one of the earliest scholars to articulate the idea of an Indo-European family of languages, after discovering striking affinities between Sanskrit, Greek and Latin, all of which he considered might have 'sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists'.⁽¹⁴⁾ His knowledge of Sanskrit facilitated for him the study of many texts in that language, particularly the *Puranas* that provide long lists of kings and dynasties of ancient India. Linking the Puranic data with that found in Greek texts, Jones was able to establish a synchronology between the dates of Alexander the Great's invasion of India and the rise to power of Chandragupta, Ashoka's grandfather, thereby greatly clarifying the chronology of the Mauryan empire in general.⁽¹⁵⁾ Jones's other seminal contribution lay in his ability to bring together a cadre of orientalists to work under the umbrella of the Asiatic Society of Bengal which he was instrumental in founding and which became the conduit for ideas and publications.

The early 19th century was to witness some extraordinary developments that eventually led to a unique breakthrough by another iconic figure in Allen's story, James Prinsep (1798–1839), a gifted engineer, draughtsman and collector who broke the code of the *Brahmi* script and thus helped to de-mystify Ashoka. This became possible by his careful study of the similarities of characters in the *Brahmi* alphabet of inscriptions on rock faces, such as at Girnar in Gujarat or Dhauli in Orissa, on the Asoka pillars in Delhi and Lauriya Nandangarh in Bihar, and on the gateways of the great *stupa* at Sanchi. The Mauryan coins that were being discovered at this time were also to prove useful in establishing some pattern in the inscriptions.⁽¹⁶⁾ The diverse data collected thus far was then coordinated with the huge amount of information from Sri Lanka that became available after the translation of a major Buddhist text, the *Mahavamsa* or the Great Dynastic Chronicle, by George Turnour in the early 1830s. The final deciphering of the script in 1837 was not only Prinsep's crowning glory but it also set in train the coming of systematic Ashokan studies.

The work that Jones had started and Prinsep had achieved was continued by Alexander Cunningham (1814–93), the third major hero of Allen's book. It was Cunningham's drive and systematic approach, particularly in his capacity as the first Director General of the Archaeological service of India, that ensured that the rock monuments, pillars and stupas became national treasures to be safeguarded and maintained with

government funding. His volume one – *Inscriptions of Ashoka* – in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, published in 1877, brought together all the Ashokan edicts then available. Today, there are in all 14 major rock edicts, three minor rock edicts, two separate rock edicts and seven pillar edicts – all listed in Allen's book – spread across nearly 30 sites across the subcontinent. The inscriptions were not all written during a single period of Ashoka's reign, but the central Buddhist message was conveyed through a variety of themes, as Ashoka's reign of over three decades progressed. The propagation of good life, the idea of state welfare, the moral agonies caused by war, instructions to state officials, advice to Buddhist monks, the king's own confessions are the main contents of the edicts. As late as 1958 a minor rock edict in Greek and Aramaic scripts was discovered at Kandahar in Afghanistan; and it is highly likely that new sites will be further discovered. The numerous 19th-century photographs and line drawings of sculptures and images interspersed throughout Allen's book add to both the clarity and richness of the text. It is therefore regrettable that the one and only map provided in the book does not adequately or clearly name the sites.

Cunningham's dream of sustaining a systematic archaeological service in India was later fulfilled by the generous funding made available by the enigmatic Viceroy, Lord Curzon (Viceroy 1898–1905), who shared a similar passion and affection for the monuments of India.⁽¹⁷⁾ Perhaps the Viceroy's most critical decision was to put in 1902 a young and brilliant British archaeologist, John Marshall, in charge of Indian archaeology. Marshall contributed immensely to Ashokan studies by his excavations of Indo-Greek sites around the city of Taxila in the Northwest of India.⁽¹⁸⁾ Far more consequential was his excavation in the ruins of Mohenjo Daro in Sind in the 1920s. The discoveries there and in Harappa in Punjab marked a radically new understanding of the beginnings of Indian civilization.⁽¹⁹⁾ When the last British Director General of Archaeology, Mortimer Wheeler, left India after independence he handed over to Indian and Pakistani specialists the fantastic archaeological legacy of 200 years of fruitful work by the British orientalist scholars.

Allen brings out in his penultimate chapter some of the ambivalence in the attitude of modern Indians towards Ashoka. On the one hand, a particularly xenophobic form of Hindu nationalism, currently known as *Hindutva*, has downplayed the originality of the Buddhist message of Ashoka. Attempts are still made to appropriate the Buddha in the service of the greater Hindu religious fold, reminding us of how authentic Buddhism was eased out of India proper from the middle of the first millennium AD. A similar degree of appropriation is also being attempted in the case of the Indus Valley Culture and its great cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa that are claimed, without proper evidence, as part of the Hindu Vedic civilization.⁽²⁰⁾ On the other hand, Ashoka was hailed as a hero of nationalist India during the struggle for independence. His message of tolerance and compassion became Nehru's clarion call for the development of a secular India; and an Ashokan lion capital was adopted as the emblem of the Indian state. A wide range of school history textbooks in India empathetically introduce Ashoka to the children there.⁽²¹⁾

In multicultural and multi-ethnic Britain, at present, there is an ongoing debate about what should form the contents of the History syllabus in schools; a vocal right wing lobby continues to press for more systematic teaching of the British historical narrative in the interest of national integration and identity. However, the British story is only part of the general history of the world, and an over-emphasis on that story will fail to provide the children with a balanced understanding of the varieties of people who have shaped our world's history. It is unfortunate that Ashoka does not at all figure as someone worth studying in the literature of the four key stages of the national history curriculum. Allen's story therefore needs to be made more accessible for the benefit of thousands of history teachers in Britain. One model that may be emulated but is now out of print appeared over three decades ago when Hemant and Helen Kanitkar produced their splendid little book on Ashoka for the Harrap World History programme.⁽²²⁾ Allen's intervention in the debate over history teaching may secure for Ashoka a thoroughly deserved slot in the national curriculum. Indeed the British narrative itself will gain in stature when children come to learn something about the unearthing of Indian history by British scholars.

Notes

1. H. Raychaudhuri, *Political History of Ancient India* (Delhi, 1996, 8th edition), pp. 234–85.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. G. Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (New Delhi, 2003), pp. 117–48.
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Pillar Edict 3.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. R. Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Delhi, 1997, 2nd edition), pp. 41–5.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Omvedt, pp. 160–74.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. A. Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Vol. 2* (Leiden, 1997), pp. 147–8, 307–33.
[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For two positions on this, see R. Thapar, 'Historical traditions in Early India c. 1000 BC to AD 600' in A. Feldherr and G. Hardy, *The Oxford History of Historical Writing, Vol. 1, Beginnings to AD 600* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 553–76; and V. Lal, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (New Delhi, 2003), pp. 14, 16, 39–40, 58–60.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. R. Roemer, 'British Orientalism in the Eighteenth Century: The Dialectics of Knowledge and Government', in C. A. Breckenridge and P. Van Der Veer, *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, PA, 1993), pp. 215–49.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. A. Mervyn Davies, *Warren Hastings: Maker of British India* (London, 1935), pp. 420–7.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. John Keay, *India Discovered: the recovery of a lost civilization* (London, 2001).[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Charles Allen, *The Buddha and the Sahibs* (London, 2002).[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. B. Cohn, 'The command of language and the language of command', in *Subaltern Studies, Vol. 4, Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. R. Guha (New Delhi, 1994), pp. 276–329.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1994), pp. 1–35, 73–95.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Quoted in J. P. Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans* (London, 1989), p. 12.[Back to \(14\)](#)
15. C. Drekmeier, *Kingship and Community in Early India* (Stanford, CA, 1962), p. 166; also see G. Turnour, *The First Twenty Chapters of the Mahavanso etc.* (Ceylon, 1836), pp. xxi–xxix, cxiii–cxxvii.
[Back to \(15\)](#)
16. J. Prinsep, *Essays on Indian Antiquities: Historic, Numismatic and Palaeographic* (London, 1858), vol. 2, pp. 1–34, 55–101.[Back to \(16\)](#)
17. D. Gilmour, *Curzon* (London, 1994), pp. 178–81.[Back to \(17\)](#)
18. F. R. Allchin, *The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia: The Emergence of Cities and States* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 285–91; and D. Chakrabarti, *The Archaeology of Ancient Indian Cities* (New Delhi, 1997), pp. 174–81.[Back to \(18\)](#)
19. B. Avari, *India: The Ancient Past – A History of the Indian subcontinent from c. 7000 BC to AD1200* (London, 2007), pp. 38–59.[Back to \(19\)](#)
20. Ibid, pp. 38–40, 54–5, 64–6.[Back to \(20\)](#)
21. For example J. C. Aggarwal & A. Biswas, *Ancient and Medieval History of India for Class XI: in accordance with the syllabus prescribed by the Central Board of Secondary Education, Delhi*, (New Delhi, 1998).[Back to \(21\)](#)
22. Hemant and Helen Kanitkar, *Asoka and Indian Civilization*, ed. Malcolm Yapp and Margaret Killingray (London, 1978).[Back to \(22\)](#)

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