
Asoka: Ruthless Conqueror or Enlightened Ruler?



Overview: The Indian leader Asoka (“a-sho-ka”) ruled the Mauryan Empire over 2,000 years ago. He helped to spread one of the world’s most popular religions and established reforms that still have great meaning for modern-day Indians. But his story also has a dark side. Working with limited information, historians have tried to present a fair picture of this great figure. This Mini-Q asks you to do the same.

The Documents:

Document A: The Battle of Kalinga (map and chart)

Document B: Asoka’s Strategy

Document C: Asoka’s Awakening

Document D: The Edicts of Asoka (map)

Document E: Rock Edict XIII: Kalinga

Document F: Asoka’s Legacy

A Mini Document Based Question (Mini-Q)

Hook Exercise: Do the Ends Justify the Means?

Directions: There is an important question that we can ask both about history and our personal behavior – Do the ends ever justify the means? That is, is it sometimes OK for actions to cause pain and suffering along the way if the final result – the end – is positive?

Below are five situations. With a partner, discuss each one and ask the question, do the ends in this situation justify the means? Be sure to identify the means and the ends in each situation before making your decision.

Situation One: Three players on the Detroit Tigers baseball team secretly take steroid drugs to build more muscle mass. All three make the American League All-Star team and then lead the Tigers to a win in the World Series. The victory is a great boost for the struggling Detroit economy. The city is deliriously happy. (Fictional story)

Situation Two: The computer lab at Jones Commercial High School is vandalized, with damages totaling over \$200,000. The principal has firm evidence that several students in the Tuesday 10th period class were responsible, but he doesn't know which ones. Since no one is talking, he suspends the entire class for the rest of the school year. Finally, feeling the pressure, two boys admit to the crime one week later.

Situation Three: To improve air-travel security, the federal government orders full-body X-ray scans or full-body pat downs of all passengers passing through security in American airports, despite complaints that this represents an invasion of privacy.

Situation Four: In order to control its fast-growing population, China establishes a one-child policy. Parents who produce more than one child must pay a special high tax. Population rates decline.

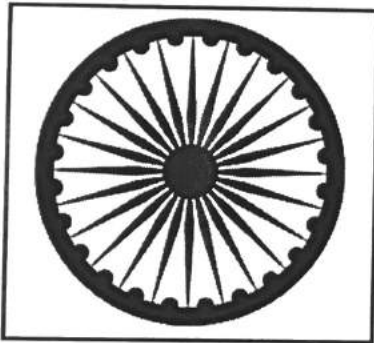
Situation Five: A central government decides to fight a civil war to hold a nation together and to end slavery. Six hundred thousand soldiers die. The nation does hold together and slavery is abolished.

Background Essay

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** (below) was named for Asoka (“a-sho-ka”), who ruled most of what later



became India from 268 BCE until his death in 232 BCE. In many ways, he is the founding father of India. As a warrior, he conquered valuable territory that remains part of

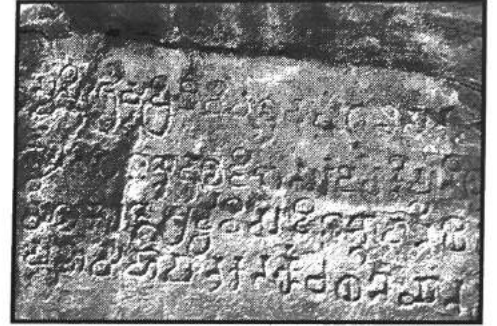
India today. As a ruler, he introduced a form of government, based in **Buddhist** spiritual belief, that has been an important guide to the nation and to many people throughout the world.

As prince of the Mauryan Empire – named after Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka’s grandfather – Asoka reportedly led a lavish lifestyle, enjoying expensive horses and great feasts. But 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. He sent **missionaries** to other lands and carved royal messages on numerous stone monuments that served as ancient-era billboards across the empire (below). These **edicts** 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 a ruler beyond any in their history.

There’s 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?

This Mini-Q investigates a man about whom we know relatively little, and what we do know is written mostly in stone. We know from Asoka’s own words that he was at times a troubled man. As he grew older he was apparently haunted by some of his early deeds as an emperor. Like so many who have made a large impact on the world, this story has both its dark and its light sides. Which side of Asoka should history remember? Examine the seven documents that follow and do your best to answer the question of this Mini-Q: *Asoka: ruthless conqueror or enlightened ruler?*

Background Essay Questions

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 these terms:

chakra

Buddhist

transformation

missionaries

edicts

legacy

Timeline

563-483 BCE – The life of Buddha

321 BCE – Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka's grandfather, establishes the Mauryan Empire.

268 BCE – Asoka takes leadership of the Mauryan Empire.

c. 261 BCE – Asoka conquers Kalinga.

232 BCE – Asoka dies.

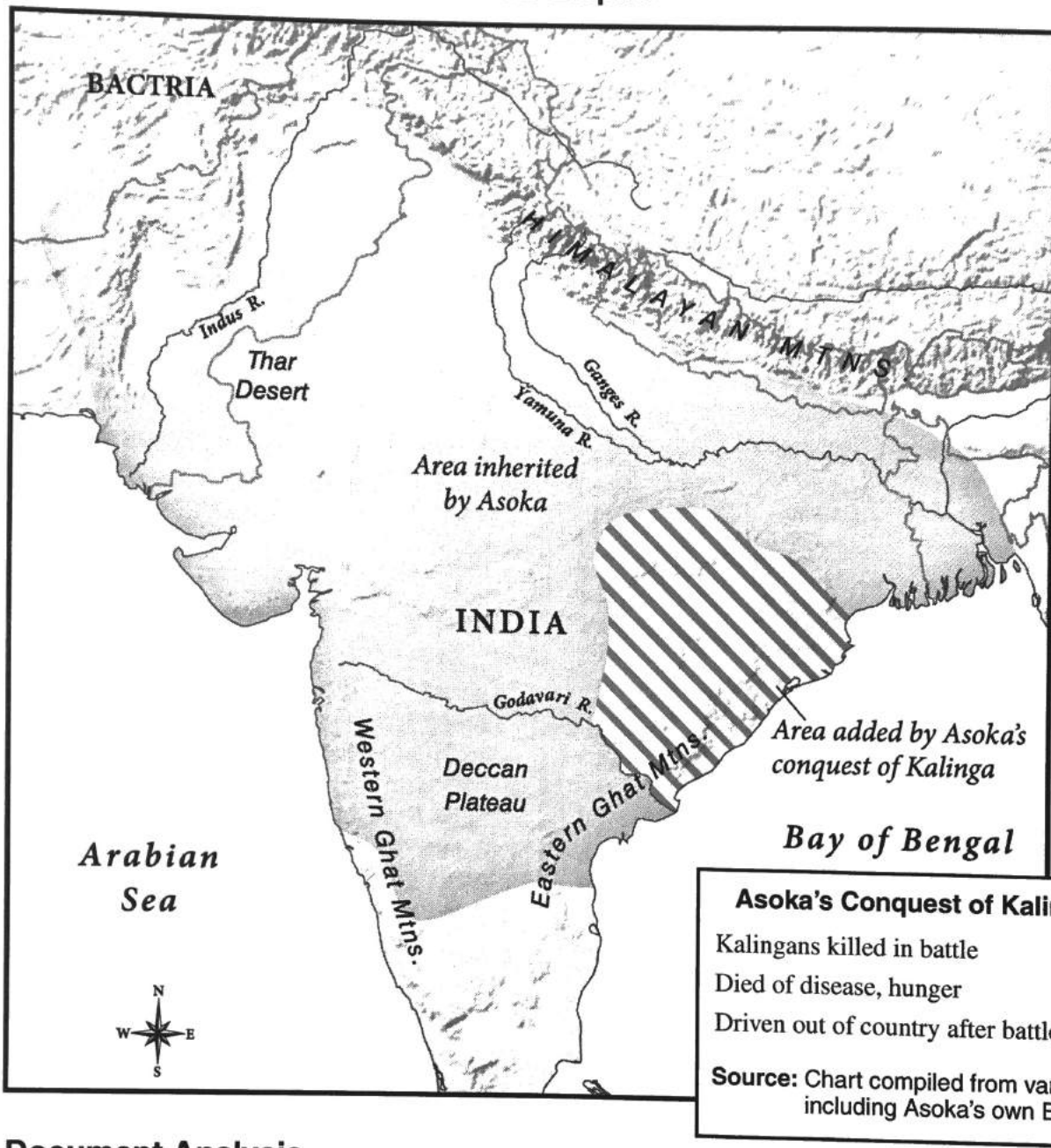
185 BCE – The Mauryan Empire collapses.

1947 CE – India becomes an independent nation.

Document A

Source: Map created from various sources.

Asoka's Empire



Document Analysis

1. When did Asoka invade Kalinga? How many Kalingans died as a result of his conquest?
2. What is a geographic advantage Asoka's forces had against the Kalingans?
3. Why might so many Kalingans have died of hunger and disease?
4. How does this document help you answer the question, "Asoka: ruthless conqueror or enlightened ruler?"

Document B

Source: Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Oxford University Press, 1997.

The conquest of Kalinga was of importance both to the strategy and the economy of the Mauryan Empire.... [I]t stood in the way of the southern routes from the Ganges valley, and it was also a powerful maritime area, which if included within the empire would provide a convenient source of income.

Kalinga was conquered in the ninth year of Asoka's reign. After this conquest, Asoka ceased to indulge in wars of aggression. This...was not because he completely forsook the idea of war as a means to an end, though he claims to have done so, but because with the conquest of Kalinga the consolidation of the empire was complete. Furthermore there was now no opposing power within the empire. The people on the frontier were generally too weak to consider a war against him...and the kingdoms of southern India were on very friendly terms with the Mauryan Empire, judging from the edicts.

Document Analysis

1. What was the name of the empire ruled by Asoka?
2. What does it mean to be a powerful "maritime area"?
3. How would conquering Kalinga help the economy of Asoka's empire?
4. How does this document help you answer the question, "Asoka: ruthless conqueror or enlightened ruler?"

Document C

Source: Historian Michael Wood, as quoted in the 2009 PBS documentary *The Story of India*.

When the war in Kalinga was over...and the people [were] conquered, he [Asoka] felt inside him a great crisis, a stirring for meaning and a remorse. Asoka goes on a pilgrimage seeking a guru, a teacher. And by the riverbank he met a Buddhist monk and the monk told him to sit beneath the Bodhi tree where the Buddha had found enlightenment. And there the power of ideas and the power of the state came together in a uniquely Indian way. [It was] a rejection of the path of violence [and] of a whole way of understanding history. While he was here, Asoka gave rich gifts to the poor. He consulted with local communities about proper governance, about good conduct...forming in his mind now was a political order the sort of which had never been conceived of before in the history of the world.

Document Analysis

1. Who did Asoka seek after conquering Kalinga?
2. In what way did Asoka imitate the Buddha?
3. According to the document, how did Asoka's ideas change after finding enlightenment?
4. How did Asoka apparently feel after conquering Kalinga? Why did he feel that way?
5. What does Michael Wood mean when he says, "[It was] a rejection...of a whole way of understanding history"?
6. How does this document help you answer the question, "Asoka: ruthless conqueror or enlightened ruler?"

Document D

Source: Excerpts from the edicts of Asoka, circa 250 BCE.

Note: Asoka's 33 edicts are located throughout modern-day India, Nepal and Pakistan. Those engraved on pillars are known as "pillar edicts" and those on walls or boulders are "rock edicts." They were placed so that travelers across the land would see them.

Rock Edict II

Medicinal herbs whether useful to man or to beast, have been brought and planted wherever they did not grow; similarly, roots and fruit have been brought and planted wherever they did not grow. Along the roads wells have been dug and trees planted for the use of men and beasts.

Pillar Edict IV

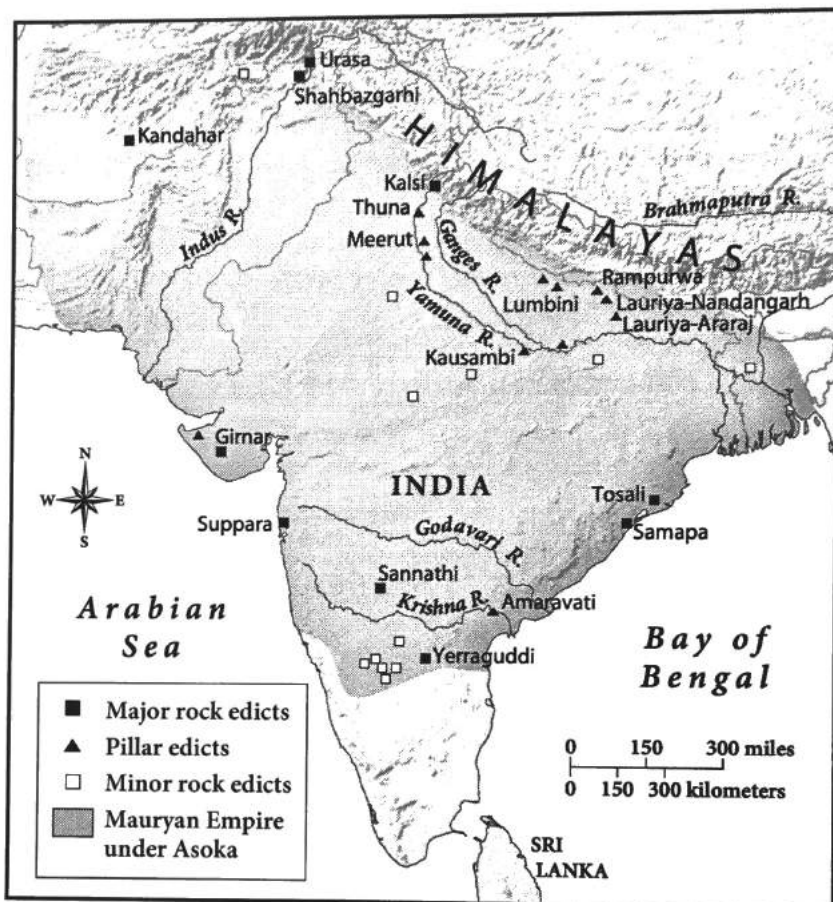
I have decreed that prisoners who have been convicted and sentenced to death shall be granted a respite of three days when their relatives may appeal to the officials for the prisoners' lives.

Rock Edict VI

... I consider that I must promote the welfare of the whole world, and hard work and the dispatch of business are the means of doing so. Indeed there is no better work than promoting the welfare of the whole world. And whatever may be my great deeds, I have done them in order to discharge my debt to all beings.

Rock Edict XII

The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others.



Source: Map created from various sources.

Document Analysis

1. How many major rock edicts did Asoka create?
2. According to the edicts, what did Asoka do to improve health?
3. What did Asoka do for convicted murderers?
4. Explain what Asoka means in Edict XII when he says that by honoring the faiths of others, a person exalts his own faith. Does this support the idea that Asoka was sincere about "promoting the welfare of the whole world"?
5. What does the map tell you about Asoka's level of commitment to his laws?
6. How can you use this document to answer the question, "Asoka: ruthless conqueror or enlightened ruler?"

Document E

Source: An excerpt from the edicts of Asoka, circa 250 BCE.

Rock Edict XIII (Engraved eight years after Kalinga)

Today if a hundredth or a thousandth part of those people who were killed or died or were deported when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer..., it would weigh heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods [Asoka].

The Beloved of the Gods believes that one who does wrong should be forgiven as far as it is possible to forgive him. And the Beloved of the Gods [wishes friendship] with the forest tribes of his empire, but he warns them that he has power even in his remorse and he asks them to repent, lest they be killed.

Note: Rock Edict XIII makes these additional points:

- Asoka's messengers have traveled as far as Syria, Greece, Egypt, and Sri Lanka, spreading Dharma, the teachings of Buddha.
- Asoka encourages his sons and great-grandsons to make any future conquests using Dharma, not military might. In Pillar Edict II, Asoka describes Dharma as "little evil, much good, kindness, generosity, truthfulness, and purity."

Historians believe Asoka was the first important ruler to promote Buddhism.

Document Analysis

1. Who is "the Beloved of the Gods"?
2. According to Rock Edict XIII, how does Asoka now feel about the conquering of Kalinga?
3. Does Asoka believe he should be forgiven?
4. What does Asoka say should be done with "the forest people"?
5. How can you use this document to support the argument that Asoka was an enlightened ruler?
6. How can you use this document to support the argument that Asoka was a ruthless conqueror?

Document F

Source: The late Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, as quoted in *King Asoka and Buddhism: Historical and Literary Studies*, edited by Anuradha Seneviratna, Buddhist Publication Society, 1994.

Note: Nehru was a leading figure in India's independence movement and served as the country's first prime minister.

Asoka's pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man, who, though an emperor, was greater than any king or emperors. This astonishing ruler, beloved still in India and in many other parts of Asia, devoted himself to the spread of Buddha's teachings, to righteousness and goodwill, and to public works for the good of the people. He was no passive spectator of events, lost in contemplation and self-improvement. He labored hard at public business and declared he was ready for it.

Document Analysis

1. What is Nehru's opinion of Asoka?
2. How does Nehru describe Asoka's personality as a leader?
3. Why might Asoka be admired in parts of Asia outside India?
4. How does this document help you answer the question, "Asoka: ruthless conqueror or enlightened ruler?"