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Ashoka and the Mauryan Empire

In antiquity, dozens of independent kingdoms divided the Indian subcontinent. Their people spoke different languages and practiced their own customs and faiths. Then in 326 BCE, Alexander the Great marched his army through the mountain passes and invaded the region.

Chandragupta Maurya

Shortly after Alexander's death three years later, a young soldier of a low caste named Chandragupta Maurya led a rebellion that drove out the Greek invaders. Within twenty years, Chandragupta's Mauryan Empire stretched from the Bay of Bengal in eastern India across the northern plains through the Hindu Kush into modern-day Afghanistan. For the first time, one ruler controlled most of the subcontinent.

It was not India's size but its cultural diversity that made the Mauryan Empire difficult to govern. Chandragupta divided his empire into smaller regions called provinces. He placed each province under the rule of a prince or another member of the royal family. Chandragupta's administrative system was so efficient that later conquerors of India kept parts of it intact for centuries.

To maintain control and protect his life, Chandragupta took extreme precautions. Spies sent him secret reports from every province. He never slept in the same bed two nights in a row, and servants tasted all his food for poison.

Later in his life, Chandragupta Maurya sought enlightenment by becoming a Jain, a religion that forbids harming any living creature. According to legend, the emperor stepped down from his throne to travel south with Jain monks. He spent his final years as an ascetic, giving up all power and luxury.

Ashoka Takes Power

A generation later, the death of Chandragupta's son sparked a brutal civil war among the emperor's grandsons. Ashoka (pronounced uh-SHO-kuh) emerged victorious after massacring his brothers.

Once in power, Ashoka built an elaborate palace filled with flowers, trees, and ornaments. Buddhist legends say that deep inside the palace, Ashoka built a torture chamber where the emperor imposed cruel punishments upon anyone who challenged his authority.

Remorse

Ashoka's army defeated the rival kingdom of Kalinga (pronounced kuh-LING-guh). The brutal conquest killed 100,000 people and drove 150,000 more from their homes. When Ashoka rode out across the battlefield to celebrate his victory, the sight of the carnage filled him with deep remorse.

The emperor then had a spiritual transformation. He renounced war and became a devout Buddhist. He practiced ahimsa (pronounced uh-HIM-sah), refusing to harm any living creature. Ashoka outlawed animal sacrifices and gave up eating meat.

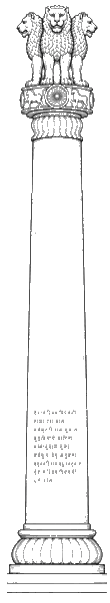
Outreach

Ashoka built Buddhist shrines throughout his empire. The emperor sent missionaries abroad to spread his new faith. While Buddhism eventually declined on the Indian subcontinent, Ashoka's efforts helped make it a major religion across China, Japan, and Southeast Asia.

Ashoka spent the next 32 years of his rule emphasizing human charity and respect for all living things. He ignored the caste system and ordered judges to apply the law fairly throughout his empire. To improve daily life, he directed workers to build trade roads, dig roadside wells, and provide medical care for both people and animals.

Words in Stone

Most of what we know about Ashoka's rule comes from the words he ordered carved into rocks and stone pillars throughout his empire. The inscriptions promoted Buddhist teachings, outlined royal laws, and explained how the emperor governed. Many of these stone monuments still stand today, more than 2,200 years later.



The emperors who followed Ashoka were weak. After his death, the caste system reasserted itself as the empire gradually shrank. In 185 BCE, an assassin killed the last Mauryan ruler, bringing an end to the dynasty that first united the subcontinent.

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Fill in the Blanks

Chandragupta Maurya rose to power after Alexander the Great i__v__d__d India. He drove out the G__e__k invaders and built an e__p__re that u__i__ed most of the s__b__o__t__n__nt. Chandragupta divided his empire into p__o__i__c__s and used s__i__s to maintain c__n__r__l. Later, he became a J_____ and gave up his ★p__w__r. A generation later, his g__a__d__on Ashoka seized power after a brutal c__v__l war with his b__o__h__rs. Ashoka c__n__u__r__d Kalinga, but the d__a__h and s__f__e__i__g caused by the war filled him with r__m__r__e. He became a B__d__h__st, renounced war, and practiced a__i__sa, refusing to harm living creatures. Ashoka sent m__s__i__n__r__es abroad to spread B__d__h__sm and spent the rest of his rule promoting ★f__i__n__ss. Ashoka also ordered his teachings and laws c__r__ed into rocks and stone p__l__a__s. After A__h__k__'s death, weak rulers allowed the M__u__y__n Empire to gradually c__l__a__se.

Answer in Complete Sentences

★1. Why do you think Chandragupta Maurya believed it was necessary to maintain a spy network in his empire?

2. What was the cause of Ashoka's great spiritual conversion?

★3. What is a missionary? You may use context clues or a dictionary to find your answer.

4. Explain how Ashoka transformed Buddhism into a major world religion.

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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