

ASHOKA

●the (un)great●



SUBHODEEP MUKHOPADHYAY

ASHOKA THE UNGREAT

auṃ viṣṇuḥ auṃ viṣṇuḥ auṃ viṣṇuḥ |
auṃ tadviṣṇoḥ paramaṃ padaṃ sadā paśyanti sūrayaḥ |
divīva cakṣurātataṃ ||
auṃ namo nārāyaṇāya |

auṃ asato mā sadgamaya | tamaso mā jyotirgamaya | mṛtyormā amṛtaṃ
gamaya |
auṃ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ ||

auṃ gaṇeśāya namaḥ |

ASHOKA THE UNGREAT

Subhodeep Mukhopadhyay

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A c. 1st century BCE/CE Indian relief from Amaravathi village, Guntur district, Andhra Pradesh (India). Preserved in Guimet Museum, Paris (2005)

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Dedication

To Shreya and Adi

Acknowledgements

First of all I would like to thank my wife, Shreya for her constant support and encouragement. As an artist, she has the unique ability to view things from many different perspectives, and this has, over the course of our many discussions, helped sharpen my thesis. My thanks are also to my parents and my son, Adi for patiently putting up with me and giving me the space to write in peace and tranquility.

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Finally as the author, I am ultimately responsible for the contents of what follows and any errors or oversights are mine alone.

Preface

The following excerpt on Ashoka is from a typical NCERT text book[1] used to teach impressionable young children in Indian schools today. The book is called “Our Past - I” and is a prescribed textbook for History for Class VI in many CBSE schools.[2]

Ashoka was one of the greatest rulers known to history and on his instructions inscriptions were carved on pillars, as well as on rock surfaces..... Ashoka’s dhamma did not involve worship of a god, or performance of a sacrifice. He felt that just as a father tries to teach his children, he had a duty to instruct his subjects. He was also inspired by the teachings of the Buddha. There were a number of problems that troubled him. People in the empire followed different religions, and this sometimes led to conflict. Animals were sacrificed. Slaves and servants were ill-treated. Besides, there were quarrels in families and amongst neighbors. Ashoka felt it was his duty to solve these problems. So, he appointed officials, known as the *dhamma mahamatta* who went from place to place teaching people about *dhamma*.

I remember being taught something similar in my history course during my school days some 20 years ago. Ashoka the Great was supposed to be a big deal. Apart from Alexander the Great and Akbar the Great, Ashoka was the *only* other emperor in India to have received this honorific. At that time we also had “Discovery of India” by Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of modern India nation state as a mandatory text, and he was full of praise for Ashoka and his *Dhamma*.

Let us try to understand the impact of the above text on young children’s minds. He or she will start believing and internalizing the following key takeaways:

- Ashoka was the greatest emperor India ever had.
- Ashoka was inspired by the teachings of Buddha.
- The existing Vedic Hindu religion was full of backward practices and superstitions.

- Animal sacrifices were common among Hindus.
- Slavery was common among Hindus.
- People quarreled with each other.
- There was discontent and strife everywhere.
- A ruler's duty is to involve himself in all aspects of his subjects' lives – societal as well as personal.

To these points, let us add some other important historical “facts” taught in typical school history books from class VI to class X in most ICSE and CBSE schools.[\[3\]](#)

- The Indus Valley civilization was an egalitarian society which had no divisions. They were advanced people with advanced town planning. The script has not been deciphered but scholars seem to be sure that it was *definitely* not Sanskrit and that the Indus people were *definitely* different from the later Vedic Aryans.
- Aryans invaded India in approximately 1500 BCE and subdued the natives and aborigines.
- Hinduism is riddled with social problems like caste system and gender inequality.
- We learn about myths like Ramayana and Mahabharata.
- Brahmins oppressed other classes.
- Medieval Hindu kings always fought with each other and Hindu kings never united with each other to fight the enemies.
- Then came the Islamic rulers. We now suddenly become acquainted with intimate details of day to day life of most Turkish and Mughal kings.
- Many chapters are devoted to Akbar's golden age.
- Then came the British. There was no united India prior to that, Britain created India by uniting “warring states”.
- Then came Gandhi, Nehru and finally Independence.

Generally we take this kind of “factual” history for granted, and never try to understand its impact on impressionable 10+ year old kids. For at least 4 years, ideas like these are *continuously* drilled into the minds of young and adolescent children. Some of them will take up Science and Commerce after their Boards, while some may take up History as a subject. Many of these people will go on to do PhD's in various aspects of Indian history and some of them also go on to become Indian Administrative

Service (IAS) and Indian Foreign Service (IFS) officers, representing Indians in India and abroad.

I studied in an ICSE school. I cannot vouch for other kids, but in my case this kind of biased course curricula had a singularly negative impact on me. I grew up hating History as a subject and developed an utter contempt for almost all things Hindu and Indian. I was a good student in school, and took all the “facts” mentioned in the book as absolute truth. I didn’t study History as an academic subject after 10th standard; in my experience, most of those who go on to study history of India as a subject become the strongest critiques of India and Indian culture. No wonder we as a nation continue to produce IFS (Indian Foreign Service) and IAS (Indian Administrative Service) officers who have a distorted and perhaps even a false understanding of India, her past, her people and her culture. Can we be certain of how well they will represent India and India’s interests in the international fora and talk about her future? It is not surprising that we as a People and as a culture continue to be misunderstood and misrepresented in the global arena, because the English-speaking elite representing India abroad have become rootless cosmopolitans having lost their civilizational mooring.

Today when I read textbooks like the one quoted earlier, I am quick to spot such implied or stated academic Hinduphobia, anti-Indic biases and latent communist/socialist/welfare state undertones. I begin to ask the question – why should a discussion on a historical person in a Class VI History textbook be used to pit religions against each other to drive home a political agenda. I have also realized with time that “Great” in the context of Indian history was reserved for only those kings, who had caused maximum harm and destruction of Indic culture and especially Hinduism.

When I was in school, like most children, there was no way for me to know anything different from what the textbooks taught. My only source of knowledge were either school textbooks or American encyclopedias of history which again unsurprisingly talked about the usual stereotypes of “cow, caste and curry”. I could not relate to anything that was taught in our history books. History was replete with battles Indians kings lost and kept on losing. Everyone invaded us – Aryans, Mughals and British. Buddhism believe in *ahimsa*. Buddhism was based on rationality. Jainism was based on non-violence. Islam believed in the equality of all people. Christianity

was associated with “scientific temper”. The inherent and unspoken, and in some cases explicit implication, as I will go on to demonstrate, was that Hinduism was not like other religions – it had caste, it had superstitions, mythical personages like Ram and Krishna, meaningless rituals, animal sacrifices and evil practices like *sati*.

Yet at our homes or at a societal level, conversations often refer to characters from Ramayana and Mahabharata for drawing lessons for dealing with life-situations, or for seeking inspiration on how to be. You may also find Indians, who when they want to refer to something ancient using the phrase “of Mandhatri’s time” (Mandhatri was an ancient Indian king). These are apparently mythical characters, yet they are an integral part of our lives and their impact on our lives have been profound. On the other hand, you will hardly find anyone referring to an incident from Ashoka’s life. What does this tell us? Ashoka being the greatest historic king, has not found a role in our collective cultural psyche, in our lives – there are no similes, no imageries or pithy sayings associated with Ashoka. Which, come to think of it, is pretty strange, for a king termed as “great.”

I was inspired to look into the history of Ashoka when I came across a wonderful lecture by noted Economist and writer, Sanjeev Sanyal titled “*How much of Indian History is Really True?*”^[4] In that lecture, he very clearly demonstrates how the study of history in India is still based on the old pre-independence colonial constructs, and how it has been hijacked by Marxist historians to further a divisive and perfidious political agenda. As I started reading the actual source materials like the Rock Edicts, Ashokavadana and Mahavamsa in English and Sanskrit, I discovered one startling fact – the Ashoka about whom we learn in our schools is *significantly* different from the one described in these original sources. Ashoka is a great king with great achievements, famed for his tolerance, social work and relentless focus on ethical living – this is what we learn in schools.

The Ashoka in the original sources emerges as a much more complex persona with character traits ranging from greatness to tyrannical despotism. On the one hand he professes and apparently practices non-harm, and on the other he orders the genocide of a religious minority. On the one hand he espouses religious equality, and on the other he establishes Religious Police to ensure the propagation of Buddhism. This book

provides detailed evidences for all such claims. And the best part – none of this evidence is new or non-traditional, it has been there for a long time and is in fact, available from the same sources that traditional scholars have made use of in constructing the “Ashoka the Great” narrative. The weight of evidence is, as I have demonstrated in this book, more towards Ashoka *not* being either a great person or a great emperor. This explains why the book is titled “Ashoka the Ungreat”.

I grew up on a diet of Nehruvian education and American “pop culture” similar to many of today’s average English speaking metro city kid – outwardly Western with a good English diction, internally confused with a severe inferiority complex and utter disdain for my culture and the Hindu traditions and values. I considered myself an “atheist”^[5] and made fun of Hindu rituals and customs. Additionally for reasons alluded to above (induced inferiority complex), I had high regard for Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, without having read any of the scriptures. Thankfully and accidentally, I came across Swami Vivekananda’s “Jnana Yoga” and “Karma Yoga” before my final examinations in class 12th. Reading the clear, rational and scientific views of Swami Vivekananda, followed by my extensive studies of Koran, Bible and communism, completely altered my views of my own tradition. Later during my MBA from Great Lakes Institute of Management, a course called “Intelligently Interacting with Others”, which was based on ethics and management principles as embedded in Hindu Shastra, made me *supremely* interested in our history, culture and traditions.

I have continued my studies in history since then. This book, is the result of my detailed research on Ashoka. I have thoroughly analyzed various sources of Ashoka studies, critically evaluated various existing hypotheses and storylines, challenged the traditional narratives with proof and presented an alternate story-line *based on the same sources*. This book, I believe, will offer *a sound, objective and scholarly appraisal of all the evidence available at our disposal* in re-constructing the life of Ashoka.

In Indological studies we often come across some hard to deny evidence, yet we find many traditional scholars simply ignoring them, because that would disturb their pre-existing narrative. I have made available such facts and cited all references and sources based on which I have crafted the alternative Ashokan storyline. In the last section of the

book, we will also try to understand the motivation behind such a large-scale organized myth-making campaign.

This book is academic in nature and also intended to be a fast read, with references and exhaustive notes at the end. It is meant to stimulate interest of ordinary non-specialist Indians in our rich and fascinating historical traditions and cultures.

About the Author

Subhodeep Mukhopadhyay writes on Indian socio-political issues and Hinduism. His essays have appeared in prestigious Indic Journals like IndiaFacts and Matriwords. He has a keen interest in Indian history from a civilizational perspective, Tantra Shastra and Hindu science and technology. His other areas of research include slavery and homosexuality in Islam and Christianity, human rights abuse in US and Saudi Arabia and means of cross-cultural sensitization to the myriad social issues with monotheistic cults.

His previous book *Legendary Mughal Kings: Homosexuality and Pederasty in South Asia, Pakistan and Bangladesh*, published earlier this year has received good reviews and was on the best-seller list. He is a regular writer and maintains two websites.

- The Tiny Man (www.thetinyman.in) – History and Current Affairs
- The Advaitist (www.mukhopadhyay.in) – On Hinduism

Subhodeep is a Sanskrit enthusiast and is currently working on a computational linguistics project related to Sanskrit. He is a big critique of communism, multiculturalism, monotheism and evangelism and considers them to be four of the biggest frauds ever perpetuated on mankind. He looks forward to world peace which can only come about by India becoming a civilizational Hindu Rashtra in the near future, and spreading spirituality to all corners of the globe.

Subhodeep is an Independent Management Consultant associated with the Education and Agriculture Sector. He is a Computer Engineer and MBA (Finance) by qualification and is based out of Kolkata.

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Introduction

Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Ashoka shines, and shines, almost alone, a star. - H.G. Wells in The Outline of History

In this book, I explore the real nature of the personality of Ashoka who is purported to be one of the greatest, most secular and just emperors India has ever produced.

Our NCERT textbooks as well as most scholarly texts, whether Indian or Western, are replete with admiration for Ashoka and his glorious achievements. Ashoka is considered the ideal tolerant, secular Indian monarch by almost all scholars, whether they are Marxist Indian historians, or experts in South Asian or Buddhist studies. Most scholars have fulsome praises for Ashoka, for his religious tolerance, his social work such as planting of trees, digging wells and his relentless focus on ethics and morality. Radhakumud Mookerji, the great Sanskrit scholar says the following about Ashoka[6]:

In the annals of kingship, there is scarcely any record, comparable to that of Aśoka, both as a man and as a ruler. To bring out the chief features of his greatness, historians have constituted comparisons between him and other distinguished monarchs in history, eastern and western, ancient and modern, the pagan, Moslem and Christian. In his efforts to establish a kingdom of righteousness after the highest ideals of a theocracy, he has been likened to David and Solomon of Israel in the days of its greatest glory; in his patronage of Buddhism, which helped to transform a local into a world religion, he has been compared to Constantine in relation to Christianity; in his philosophy and piety he recalls Marcus Aurelius; he was Charlemagne in the extent of his empire and, to some extent, in the methods of his administration too, while his Edicts “rugged, uncouth, involved, full of repetitions” read like the speeches of Oliver Cromwell in their mannerisms. Lastly, he has been compared to Khalif Omar and Emperor Akbar, whom also he resembles in certain respects.”

Ashoka's kingdom covered almost all of South Asia, except the southern-tip of present day Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The influence of Ashoka has been so great in post-independence India that even the official emblem of India is an adaptation of the Lion Capital of India. The Ashoka Chakra (the wheel of Ashoka) is an integral part of Indian identity, forming the center of the National Flag of India (adopted on 22nd July 1947). Numerous books have been written on Ashoka. In popular culture there have been a number of movies and Television dramas on Ashoka's life and times. John McCabe in his *The Golden Ages of History* writes[7]:

Aśoka did not confine his improvement of the State to a correction of individual conduct. He built a number of hospitals and had large gardens of medicinal herbs which he distributed to the poor. He reformed the prisons and, anticipating our advanced ideas on the subject, urged officials to help prisoners to see the blunder of crime rather than punish them. He recommended the education and kindly treatment of slaves and servants. He built hostels, dug wells and planted trees along the roads for travelers. He opened spinning houses (workshops) for widows and poor women and made provision for the aged. He had thousands of vessels of water placed on the streets of his capital to meet contingency of fire, and he imposed a fine upon any man who would not help to extinguish a fire in his neighbour's house. He made it a penal offence to throw dead animals or filth upon the streets. He instituted a department of State to attend to the welfare of the backward races in his Empire. And, above all, he denounced war and most ardently desired the friendly intercourse of all nations, sending his missionaries as far as Syria in the West to preach his gospel. His own people were his children, but all men were his brothers.

Yet despite such fulsome praise, many scholars are skeptical of the so-called achievements of Ashoka and insist that a more nuanced approach might be necessary to understand Ashoka better. With regards to the above statements, Ananda Guruge is of the opinion that "sometimes adulation exceeded the limits of accuracy" and that John McCabe "ascribed to Aśoka's ideas and deeds which none of the known sources of history — least of all his inscriptions — could bear out." [8] Taking this same skepticism forward and using the same sources that traditional scholars cite

as evidence of Ashoka's greatness, I will demonstrate in this book that an alternate history of Ashoka can be re-constructed, one where Ashoka is a much more complex character than the "Great Emperor", with more shades of gray than white, and in some instances clearly demonstrating undeniably negative characteristic traits which one cannot simply wish away.

In fact, I would go so far to say that Ashoka was, what many would consider a "war criminal" by today's standards, and behind most of his so-called social work there were some deeper political motivations, which while many researchers have pointed out, few have actually taken all the evidence together and taken it to its logical conclusion. What is necessary is a detailed analysis of the evidence without the baggage of any pre-conceived notions of "greatness". The facts must be carefully collated, analyzed and then from the facts, and without recourse to extraneous belief-systems, we should interpret the data to arrive at a plausible scenario. This is what I have attempted to do. For example, with regards to understanding Ashoka's views on Buddhism, Romila Thapar very clearly states:

I would like to propose therefore that an assessment of the impact of Buddhism on the Mauryan emperor Aśoka requires analyses from many perspectives. Since he was a person of considerable public importance, such an assessment would have to consider both his personal beliefs as well as his public use of an ideology drawn from the ethical perspectives of religion. [9]

A critical, unbiased and apolitical re-reading of Ashokan edicts, Buddhist sources and current works will show that, far from being a benevolent, secular and just emperor, Ashoka was a ruthless tyrant and was a religious fanatic and that much of what we know about him are fabrications. In the words of noted economist and popular historian and writer Sanjeev Sanyal:

Ashoka is commonly eulogized in Indian history textbooks as a great emperor and a pacifist. A current television serial is adding to the legend. The problem is that this is all based on very thin evidence and, even a little bit of probing, suggests a very different story. [10]

Historical Sources for studying Ashoka

Historical sources of Ashoka include archaeological as well as literary sources belonging to three broad categories[11]:

1. Edicts and Inscriptions
2. Northern Buddhist Sources in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan like Ashokavadana
3. Sri Lankan Pali sources of Theravada Buddhism like Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa

Edicts of Ashoka

The Edicts of Ashoka[12] are a collection of 33 inscriptions on the Pillars of Ashoka, as well as boulders and cave walls, made by Ashoka during his reign. These inscriptions are found through-out modern South Asia. There are 14 Major Rock Edicts[13]. The minor rock edicts are found from Bangladesh in the east to Afghanistan in the west, and from Delhi in the north to Karnataka in the south[14]. These edicts offer some unique insights into the life of Ashoka, his religious practices, his notions of State and Governance, his *dhamma*, and his ideas of social and animal welfare. Radhakumud Mookerji says:

Thus we have his Edicts inscribed on rock and pillar, on enduring material, which enables us to hear to this day the moving voice of Asoka across the centuries. “For that purpose have I caused this scripture of the Law to be written in order that it may endure,” says Asoka himself in his Rock Edicts V and VI. [15]

Noted historian and Indologist, and author of *The Wonder That Was India* A.L. Basham, advises some caution when interpreting the edicts. He observes that many of the Ashokan edicts were “not really edicts at all” but rather “propaganda” material. However they form “the only literature on Asoka which is strictly contemporary with the emperor himself, and they appear to represent his own words”. He says:

Some, indeed, are imperial commands, and seem to have a legislative character, but others are rather general pronouncements of policy and normative recommendations to his subjects, a form of propaganda representing an early form of the posters to be seen in almost every country in the world at the present time, urging us to

save energy, preserve the environment, and throw our litter into the trash-bin. [16]

Ashokavadana

The Ashokavadana (Ashoka Avadana)[17] is a Sanskrit Buddhist text and part of Divyavadana. It also exists in Chinese translation. According to Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya[18], “The Ashokavadana is a very important text for its antiquity as well as for its literary value. It was composed before the third century A.D. Some portion of the text are exquisite and they may be ranked as classics.” The Ashokavadana was transmitted to China by two authors in two different eras:

- 300 CE – Fa-chin of Parthia made the first translation
- 512 CE – Seng-chieh-po-lo (Sanskrit: Sanghabhara) a Sramana from Funan, translated a different recension. This version gained rapid popularity in China.

Ashokavadana has no Tibetan translation. However, the story of Kunala was translated into Tibetan as Kunalavadana by Pandit Padmakaravarman and Lochaba Ratnabhadrā in 1050 AD.

Mahavamsa

The Mahavamsa is a Sri Lankan Pali Buddhist text of the Theravada tradition about the Kings of Sri Lanka. It covers the period from the coming of Prince Vijaya from India in 543 BCE to the reign of Mahasena of Anuradhapura. The book covers in details the 3rd Buddhist Council which was held under the patronage of Ashoka in his capital Pataliputra. In this context, it provides us a lot of insights into the life and times of Ashoka, independent of the Rock Edicts and northern Ashokavadana.

Dipavamsa

The Dipavamsa is older than the Mahavamsa and many scholars believe that it is the source of many of the events described in the Mahavamsa. As an important early work in Buddhist Pali tradition, it chronicles the royal lineages of ancient Sri Lanka and provides insights into ancient history of Sri Lanka and India. The Dipavamsa gives a detailed account of the arrival of Theri Sangamitta, daughter of Asoka to Sri Lanka.

As per Romila Thapar, the Dipavamsa was compiled between the 3rd Century BCE and the 4th Century CE.

This book is organized in 4 parts:

1. Part 1 deals with the traditional popular history of Ashoka as taught in our schools and colleges.
2. Part 2 challenges many of the assumptions that go into the making of the traditional narrative.
3. Part 3 presents an alternate history of Ashoka backed by solid evidence.
4. Part 4 discusses the reasons behind why the current narrative (involving a high level of mythicization of Ashoka) finds more favor in academics, despite glaring inconsistencies.

Traditional Biography of Ashoka

In this chapter I present a traditional biography of Ashoka that we find in almost all school level History textbooks and other popular history texts.

A Typical Biography of Ashoka

Ashoka was one of India's greatest emperor who ruled almost all of Indian sub-continent from 270 BCE to 232 BCE. He belonged to the illustrious Maurya Dynasty (322 BCE to 185 BCE). His kingdom stretched from Bangladesh in the east to Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan in the West.

Ashoka was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the great Maurya dynasty. Chandragupta after a long career retired as a Jain saint at Shravanabelagola in Southern Mysore. Most of the information of Ashoka's life are found from his Rock Edicts (inscriptions) and from Buddhist texts. Ashoka despite being such a mighty emperor comes across as a humble person in his inscriptions[19].

Prior to his coronation, he was a very successful Viceroy at Takshashila and Ujjain.

Ashoka ascended the throne at the age of 30. During this period there was peace and harmony and "straightway after his consecration his command spread" far and wide and "being consecrated king, Asoka raised his youngest brother Tissa, son of his own-mother, to the office of vice-regent." [20]

He was crowned emperor in 270 B.C.E and was known popularly by two titles, Devanampiya meaning "the favorite of the Gods" and "Piyadasi" meaning "of pleasing countenance".

The only conquest undertaken by Ashoka was Kalinga War. The Kalinga war was a turning point in his life. In this war to annex the kingdom of Kalinga (modern day Odisha), thousands of people died, and many were wounded. He was filled with regret, repentance and remorse, so much so that he renounced war and violence forever.

After witnessing the carnage and devastation, the story goes, he was filled with remorse and became a devout Buddhist. He says in the Edict: “Directly after the conquest of the Kalingas, The Beloved of the Gods became keen in pursuit of Dharma, love of Dharma and inculcation of Dharma ... the chiefest conquest is not that by arms but by Dharma”. He became a pious and non-violent Buddhist[21] and “transformed his polity from one of military conquest to one of Dharmavijaya — victory by righteousness and truth. By providing royal patronage for the propagation of Buddhism both within and beyond his empire, he helped promote the metamorphosis of Buddhism into a world religion that spread peacefully across the face of Asia.” He gave up hunting and eating meat. He prohibited the slaughter of animals and birds.

He realized the futility of war and understood that his welfare lay in the welfare of his subjects. He wrote in his inscriptions, “All people are my children.” After that time, till his death Ashoka was always involved in social activity. He spent a lot of time and effort in promoting peace and harmony among people of different religions and faiths, and was considered a just and noble ruler. He donated caves[22] to the followers of Ajivika sect. Ashoka wished the well-being of all the various religious sects like Brahmins, Buddhists, Ajivikas, Nirgranthas (Jains) and in this regard bestowed charity on all of them.

Ashoka’s rule was based on *Dhamma* (Dharma) by which he referred to basic ethical and moral precepts as per Buddhist faith[23]. These included things like respect for elders, respect for ascetics, and good behavior towards servants, being merciful towards animals and being respectful of nature. He prohibited fishing on certain days and planted trees for providing shade to weary people and animal. He had wells dug to ensure continuous supply of water for his subjects.

Ashoka was initiated into Buddhism by a Buddhist saint Upagupta. After that he made pilgrimages to Lumbini Park, Kushinagar and Bodh Gaya, three important holy places for Buddhists. He constructed many Buddhist Viharas and stupas[24] throughout India. He put a lot of effort towards spreading Dhamma (Buddhism). He followed a multi-pronged approach:

- Setting-up of Dhamma Pillars (Socio-Religious Edicts)

- Appointment of Dhamma-Mahamattas
- Dhamma Proclamation (Religious Proclamations)
- Mufassil Officers of the highest grade had to “go out on circuit tours to give instruction on the Dharma to the people” [25]
- Buddhist Missionaries were sent to Greece, Syria, West Asia, Egypt, North Africa and South India (Chola and Pandya).

As an ambassador of peace, he sent his Buddhist missions to China, Sri Lanka, Greece and other faraway lands. The mission to Sri Lanka was led by his son Mahindra (also known as Mahinda in Pali). The Third Buddhist Council was conducted in the 17th year of Ashoka’s reign (251 BCE) at Kusumpura (Pataliputra), Ashoka’s capital. It lasted for 9 months and the president of the Council was Moggaliputta[26].

Till his last days Ashoka involved himself with social welfare of his subjects and in the propagation of Dhamma. He was succeeded by his two grandsons named Dasharatha in the eastern and Samprati in the western region. Brihadratha the last Mauryan king was killed in 185 BC by his own Hindu commander-in-chief Pushyamitra Sunga who established a new dynasty known as the Sunga Dynasty.

Ashokastambha (The Pillar of Ashoka) has four lion capital which symbolized his sovereignty and the supreme lordship of Buddha. Today it is the emblem of modern India.

What to Expect from this Book

Now that we have briefly re-acquainted ourselves with the life and times of Ashoka as generally taught to us, let me make the case that many of the exploits of greatness attributed to Ashoka are stories and myths and exaggerations, except the part about the mindless violence and genocide in Kalinga.

Buddhist works themselves admit that Ashoka was “an exceptionally cruel and ruthless prince who had many of his brothers killed in order to seize the throne” [27]. Much of what we are taught in school and colleges about benevolence of Ashoka are mostly fabrications or inadequate, selective and often misleading readings of the evidence. In the next few chapters I will demonstrate with *hard compelling* evidence why I make such a claim.

Challenging the Traditional Narrative

As discussed earlier, there are essentially three sources from which information about Ashoka's life may be gleaned – the so-called Rock Edicts, the Northern Buddhist texts (like Ashokavadana) in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese and the Southern Theravada Buddhist texts of Sri Lanka. The first thing that has struck almost all scholars and students of Ashoka and Buddhist studies, is that there is *very little* in common between these different sources of information.

Conflicting Information

A. L. Basham, makes the following observation:

One of the most remarkable features about these three sources, when we compare one with another, is that they have very little in common. The highest common factor of the three is merely that Asoka was a mighty Indian ruler, whose capital was Pataliputra and who adopted a new and enlightened policy as a result of his conversion to Buddhism. Almost everything else is missing in one source or another. [28]

Even an ardent admirer of Ashoka, Radhakumud Mookerji admits [29] that “a mass of tradition has gathered around the name Asoka. Myths and legends have freely and luxuriantly grown around it.” With regards to the suitability of literary records vis-à-vis rocks edicts, he confesses that the “two sources are, again, sometimes in agreement, but oftener in conflict... the legends are themselves at conflict with one another in many places, and thus betray themselves all the more.”

An important incident in Ashoka’s life is the Third Buddhist Council held under the patronage of Ashoka. This is supposed to have been a very significant event and is talked about in detail in the literary sources. According to John Strong:

...in the Sri Lankan texts, much emphasis is put on Aśoka’s role as a purifier of the Saṅgha. Acceding to the throne 218 years after the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa, he purges the ranks of the monastic community with the help of the Elder Moggaliputta Tissa, defrocking no less than 60,000 bhikkhus judged to be heretical. He then convenes the Third Council at Pāṭaliputta, summoning the orthodox Theravādins to recite the true Dhamma. [30]

Yet there is no *mention* of this momentous incident in any of Ashoka’s edicts. Ram Mohan Roy very rightly observes [31]:

...the Third Buddhist Council was held under the patronage of Aśoka Maurya, but there is no mention of it in the edicts of Devānāmpriya Priyadarśī. The absence is very glaring, as

Devānāmpriya Priyadarśī describes matters of far less significance in his edicts about what he has done to promote Dharma.

In fact, there is no mention of this even in the North Indian traditional texts like Ashokavadana. John Strong correctly summarizes the situation:

There is no purge of the community, no reference to Moggaliputta Tissa, no talk of a Third Council or of missionaries. Instead, Aśoka is said to rule one hundred years after the parinirvāṇa, and prominence is given to his relationship with the Elder Upagupta, to his pilgrimage to the various important sites connected with the life of the Buddha, and to his holding of a pañcavārṣikā, a great quinquennial festival of merit ... the North Indian tradition's complete silence about the Third Council at Pāṭaliputta has led some to doubt or to reevaluate its very historicity. [32]

When it comes to Ashoka's family, there is practically no commonality between the Rock Edicts and the literary texts, and even among the literary texts.

1. Ashoka was born a Jain, as per Sanskrit text Rajatarangini. Additionally, many of his family members were Jains or Ajivikas. So it is quite likely that they were vegetarians. Yet in Rock Edict I Ashok states his love for eating meat of various exotic creatures. He says: "Formerly, in the kitchen of Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, hundreds of thousands of animals were killed every day to make curry. But now with the writing of this Dhamma edict only three creatures, two peacocks and a deer are killed, and the deer not always." [33]
2. Ashoka is supposed to have sent his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghmitra to Sri Lanka to spread Buddhism. Yet there is no mention of them or this event in the Rock Edicts.
3. The edicts talk about Ashoka's brothers and sisters who all live in and around Pataliputra. According to Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa however, Ashoka had killed all his brothers barring Tissa.
4. There is no mention of Tissa in the Edicts.

5. As per the Allahabad Pillar, Ashoka's wife was Karuwaki and son was Tivara. However none of the texts refer to either Karuwaki or Tivara.
6. Ashoka's son Mahinda is mentioned in the Sri Lankan Buddhist canon, but not in the Northern Indian Buddhist tradition which instead talks about a son called Kunala, who again is absent in the Southern texts. And *both* Mahinda as well as Kunala are absent in the edicts, which is rather strange.

Again there is no consensus even as far as Ashoka's reign is concerned. There are major "chronological discrepancies" between Northern Buddhist and Sri Lankan Pali sources, a difference of almost 118 years between their individual reckoning of Ashoka's coronation.[\[34\]](#) It is almost as if we are dealing with two different people, King Devanam Piyadasi of the Rock Edicts and Ashoka of the North Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhist tradition.[\[35\]](#)

Please note that it is *these conflicting sources* which have been used to construct the traditional biography of Ashoka, based on which he has been dubbed Ashoka, the Great.

With respect to literary sources, Romila Thapar cautions that[\[36\]](#):

- a. many contemporary sources have been destroyed or are undiscovered
- b. literary style sometimes creates problems
- c. translation of specialized terms of documents belonging to an ancient age is another challenge
- d. obtaining cross evidence from other sources is another daunting challenge

In such cases, careful scholarship and critical study is required to sift the data, which is what I have attempted to do in this book.

A Shadowy Figure whom No One Knew

If you time-travelled back to the year 1800 and asked any average Indian about the mighty Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, he or she would have stared blankly at you and would have had no clue what you were talking about. They would know about Rama, Krishna, Pandavas, perhaps even Chandragupta Maurya, Pala, Sena, Chola, Vijaynagar kings and local chieftains and brave warriors, but no one would have any idea who Ashoka Maurya was. As per Romila Thapar, “In the Puranic Texts of the Brahmins, Aśoka occurs merely as an undistinguished name in a list of Mauryan kings.”[\[37\]](#) Ananda Guruge rightly observes[\[38\]](#):

“Although ... Aśoka has remained in vivid living memory in the minds of every successive generation of Theravāda Buddhists outside India, he was virtually forgotten in the land of his birth and remained for at least a millennium an unknown and unrecalled name until the 1830s ... In contrast to the founder of the Mauryan Dynasty, Candragupta, on whom the mainstream Indian tradition and literature lavished much attention, Aśoka had been relegated to oblivion.”

Most scholars agree that very little is known about Ashoka. And as discussed above, whatever is known, does not necessarily agree with each other. Despite such gaps, there has hardly been any refutation of the current account of Ashoka’s life in school texts or popular history books, and the counter-views remain restricted to academia. As I have shown later, many scholars over the last 2 centuries, have selectively picked evidences which suited their narrative, and dubbed everything else as exaggerations and myths. According to A.L. Basham:

In fact, when all is said, *we know very little* about Asoka’s personality and motives. We have, admittedly, a number of fairly brief documents from his hand, but these are intended to project his public image, and do not show us the real man with the intimacy with which we know, for example, Akbar, thanks to the writings of both his friends and his critics, and to the accounts of foreign travelers. [\[39\]](#)

Ashoka proclaims in his edicts that Buddhist missionaries from his kingdom travelled far and wide to spread the message of his Dharma. His missionaries are supposed to have gone to Persia, Egypt, Greece, Southern India and Sri Lanka. Yet there are no such records of visits of Buddhist

missionaries to either Greece or Egypt or Persia. Surely such an event would have been recorded *at least somewhere*, given that, unlike Indians, Greeks and Romans were not “lacking in historical sense” and recorded even unimportant stray events. Yet they are surprisingly silent of any Buddhist missionaries from India.

In fact the Greeks are conspicuously silent of Ashoka himself. Greek records give minute details about Sandrocottus and Amitrochates, identified as Chandragupta Maurya and his son Bindusara respectively, yet they do not talk about the greatest ruler of the Maurya dynasty, Ashok who ruled a generation later. A.L. Basham correctly observes:

Sources from classical Europe give us no information on Asoka’s conquests through Dhamma. It is noteworthy that in Greek and Latin texts there are several references to Asoka’s grandfather Candragupta, under the name Sandrocottus, and there is one to his father Bindusara, under the other- wise unknown name Amitrochates, *but there are no references whatever to Asoka himself.* (Emphasis mine) [\[40\]](#)

As early as 1902, Rhys David expressed his doubt on Ashoka ever having sent his Buddhist missionaries to Greece. He is skeptical of the whole foreign proselytizing missions and says:

It is difficult to say how much of it is mere royal rodomontade. It is quite likely that the Greek kings are only thrown in by way of makeweight as it were and that no emissaries had been actually sent there at all. Even had they been sent, there is little reason to believe that Greek self-complacency would have been much disturbed. Aśoka’s estimate of the results obtained is better evidence of his own vanity than it is of Greek docility. We may imagine the Greek amusement at the absurd idea of a “barbarian” teaching them their duty; but we can scarcely imagine them discarding their gods and their superstitions at the bidding of an alien king. [\[41\]](#)

In most of his inscriptions, Ashoka refers to himself as Devanam-priya, literally meaning favored among Gods. However in colloquial Sanskrit, Devanam-Priya literally means fool. Bhandarkar says:

What is more worthy of note is that he calls himself Devanampriya, and one can well understand how the modern students of Grammar (vyakarana) may feel inclined to laugh at it. For do not Bhattoji Dikshita, author of the Siddhantakaumudi, and Hemachandra, author of the Abhidhanachintamani, tell us that Devanampriya means ‘a fool’ or ‘dunce’? They are, therefore, apt to wonder what Ashoka means by calling himself Devanampriya. [42]

Let us now place the evidence together in front of us and see what we can conclude.

1. Ashoka was unknown to the Greeks, although the Greeks knew about Sandrocottus (identified as Chandragupta) and Amitrochates (identified as Bindusara), his grandfather and father respectively.
2. Ashoka was practically unknown in India, and there are almost no Indian literary records of him.
3. Although Ashoka was one of the most powerful rulers of his time, he was completely ignorant of his neighboring country China[43].
4. The Ashoka of literary texts is significantly different from Ashoka of the Rock Edicts.

When we put all this evidence together a clear picture begins to emerge – **Ashoka was not as important a person in Indian history as he has been made out to be by the predominant historical narrative disseminated via our history textbooks.**

Indian history before British intervention, did not know or care about any Ashoka. Ashoka was largely ignored and forgotten by Indians, which is bizarre given that he was[44] “the first ruler of a unified India and one of the greatest political figures of all time.” The irony is that people in India remember minor details of the life and times of so-called mythical figures like Mandhatri, Rama and Krishna who are supposed to have existed four thousand to five thousand years ago, but have no memory of Ashoka the Great, who reigned supreme only two thousand years ago. For any serious scholar of history, this should be a red flag and an area which merits further investigation.

Ashoka's Conversion to Buddhism

Related to Kalinga War and his remorse, is Ashoka's post-war conversion to Buddhism. As opposed to conventional wisdom, research indicates that Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism had nothing to do with the Kalinga war and that he had become a Buddhist almost two years before the Kalinga War. Scholars like James M. Macphail and Sanjeev Sanyal are very specific that the conversion of Aśoka preceded the Kalinga war. Sanjeev Sanyal says:

Even Ashoka's eulogists like Charles Allen agree that his conversion predated the Kalinga war. Moreover, he seems to have had links with Buddhists for a decade before his conversion. The evidence suggests that his conversion to Buddhism was more to do with the politics of succession than with any regret he felt for sufferings of war. [45]

There are three schools of thoughts as to why Ashoka converted to Buddhism:

- Expansionist Agenda based on Romila Thapar's research
- Spiritual Inner Calling towards Buddhism, as per the Sri Lankan Pali Buddhist Canon
- Political Rivalry with the Council of Kashi, as described in South Indian traditional accounts

Romila Thapar's Views

Eminent Indian historian and scholar, Romila Thapar categorically states that Ashoka converted to Buddhism for purely political reasons:

In our analysis of the subject we find that Aśoka was attracted to Buddhism, but his was not a case of a somewhat eccentric or unusual overnight conversion. We believe that in the context of society as it was then, Buddhism was not just another religion. It was the result of a more widespread movement towards change which affected many aspects of life from personal beliefs to social ideas. It was a socio-intellectual movement with a large range of expression, making itself apparent in contemporary thought and life. A king with a policy only slightly more imaginative than usual would have had to come to terms with such an important new development. As it was, it

was an ideal tool for an ambitious ruler of Aśoka's calibre. Whatever his personal convictions may have been regarding the religion, it was eminently suitable for such a ruler who wished to use it to consolidate political and economic power. [46]

In fact, Romila Thapar even doubts whether Ashoka had any role in propagating Buddhism in his empire or outside, and that perhaps Ashoka's dhamma was simply a means of ensuring "respect to Brahmins and other religious teachers and priests." She says[47]:

Interestingly, the Greek versions of these edicts translate *dhamma* as *eusebeia* (piety) and no mention is made anywhere of the teachings of the Buddha, as would be expected if Aśoka had been propagating Buddhism.

Sri Lankan Pali Buddhist Tradition

The second account is found in the traditional Sri Lankan Pali Sources which are quite categorical about the following set of events after Ashoka's coronation and before the Kalinga War:

It was by accident that he (Ashoka) saw the young Buddhist monk, Nyagrodha, to whom he took a liking and from whom he heard a sermon on heedfulness (*appamāda*). By uttering the traditional formula of seeking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, he became a Buddhist *upāsaka*. He began to frequent the local Buddhist temple called *Kukkuṭārāma* at Pāṭaliputra and there met the learned elder, Moggaliputta Tissa. From him, the Emperor learned of the division of the Buddha's teachings into 84,000 sections and decided to construct as many Buddhist *vihāras* in his empire — a project he completed in three years. Although he had shown utmost munificence to Buddhist institutions, he was still considered "a giver of requisites." To be an "inheritor of the religion" (*sāsanadāyādin*), one's offspring had to be ordained in the Saṅgha. This, too, was delivered in **the sixth year after coronation** when his son Mahinda and his daughter Saṅghamittā entered the Saṅgha. [48]

South Indian Traditional Accounts

As per a few South Indian traditional accounts, Ashoka converted to Buddhism when he was declared an outcaste by the Supreme Council of Kashi for fratricide and violating the treaty of Bharata. As a result of that he set about eradicating Sanskrit and Brahmanism in revenge, and thus brought the Vedic period to an end. Ashoka systematically plundered and destroyed many Brahmanical temples and ashramas. In fact this is when apparently the caste system started getting fossilized. In this regard Suchindranath Aiyar says:

Initially the Guru of the gurukula or school of sorts chose the person's caste depending on the person's capability. Not the way it is today. Asoka the Great was an Indian emperor of the Maurya Dynasty who ruled most of the Indian subcontinent from 269 BC to 232 BC. He broke the treaty of Bharata as the supreme council of Kashi... embraced Buddhism, and dismantled the Aryavarta system, which included the gurukulas' or schools for Brahmins and the armed forces. The empire fell apart subsequently. The abolishing of the gurukula system led to a situation where castes ossified and their skills of trades could be passed from father to son now rather than from the community to the entire group. This was the beginning of the rot. These are parts of history that have been eradicated by the political class for their own purposes. [\[49\]](#)

Kalinga War

In 262 B.C., eight years after his coronation, Ashoka is supposed to have attacked and conquered Kalinga, corresponding to modern day Odisha. A large Mauryan army marched into Kalinga; 100,000 died in the war and an even larger number died from wounds and hunger. A further 150,000 were taken away as captives. The battle of Kalinga was so fierce that in the aftermath of the battle, Daya River flowing next to the battlefield turned completely red because of the bloodshed. Ashoka in his Rock Edicts talks about “the dramatic change of heart he experienced on account of the havoc of death and deportation, famine and pestilence that was caused by his war of conquest against Kalinga.”[\[50\]](#)

H.G. Wells in his popular history book, *A Short History of the World*, poetically describes the horrors of the war and Ashoka’s resolve after that to change himself and the world for the better.

He invaded Kalinga, a country on the east coast of Madras, he was successful in his military operations and — alone among conquerors — he was so disgusted by the cruelty and horror of war that he renounces it. He would have no more of it. He adopted the peaceful doctrines of Buddhism and declared that henceforth the conquests should be conquests by religion.... Missionaries went from Aśoka to Kashmir, to Persia, to Ceylon and Alexandria. Such was Aśoka, greatest of kings. He was far in advance of his age.[\[51\]](#)

In Ashoka’s own words as recorded in the 13th edict of 14 Rock Edicts, he displays a great sorrow and repentance for what he has done:

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, conquered the Kalingas eight years after his coronation. One hundred and fifty thousand were deported, one hundred thousand were killed and many more died (from other causes). After the Kalingas had been conquered, Beloved-of-the-Gods came to feel a strong inclination towards the Dhamma, a love for the Dhamma and for instruction in Dhamma. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods feels deep remorse for having conquered the Kalingas.

Indeed, Beloved-of-the-Gods is deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered. But Beloved-of-the-Gods is pained even more by this —

that Brahmans, ascetics, and householders of different religions who live in those countries, and who are respectful to superiors, to mother and father, to elders, and who behave properly and have strong loyalty towards friends, acquaintances, companions, relatives, servants and employees — that they are injured, killed or separated from their loved ones. Even those who are not affected (by all this) suffer when they see friends, acquaintances, companions and relatives affected. These misfortunes befall all (as a result of war), and this pains Beloved-of-the-Gods.

There is no country, except among the Greeks, where these two groups, Brahmans and ascetics, are not found, and there is no country where people are not devoted to one or another religion. Therefore the killing, death or deportation of a hundredth, or even a thousandth part of those who died during the conquest of Kalinga now pains Beloved-of-the-Gods. Now Beloved-of-the-Gods thinks that even those who do wrong should be forgiven where forgiveness is possible. [52]

Rock Edict 13 has been dubbed by van Buitenan as “the most moving document of any dynamic history.” [53]

Was Ashoka’s remorse at the carnage at Kalinga war sincere?

One must be cautious when going through all the historical evidence. Ashoka’s sincerity is doubtful because of two reasons:

- a. His threat to the Forest-People
- b. A complete absence of the apology-related Edicts in Kalinga, the scene of the massacre

If one were to read the complete inscription of Rock Edict 13, one will find that Ashoka goes on to say the most curious thing: “Even the forest people, who live in Beloved-of-the-Gods’ domain, are entreated and reasoned with to act properly. They are told that despite his remorse Beloved-of-the-Gods has the power to punish them if necessary, so that they should be ashamed of their wrong and not be killed. Truly, Beloved-of-the-Gods desires non-injury, restraint and impartiality to all beings, even where wrong has been done.”

To paraphrase, Ashoka is threatening the forest-people that while he is “remorseful” of what he had done in Kalinga, he will not hesitate to act against them with same force to punish them. Even more intriguing is the complete absence of the apology-related Edicts in Kalinga itself. One would expect that the Kalinga would be the first place where Ashok would have begged forgiveness. Based on this, it may be argued that perhaps Ashoka is genuinely not remorseful, and is cultivating an image of earnest sincerity, towards some political end. In the words of Anand Guruge,

So far, as many as eight versions (including a condensed Greek version) have been found in such far-flung places as Afghanistan (2 copies), Pakistan (2 copies), Andhra Pradesh, Gujerat, Uttar Pradesh (near Dehra Dun), Mahārāshtra (near Bombay) — but not a single version in or near Kalinga itself. There must be a special reason for this.

The series of fourteen Rock Edicts (RE I – XIV) appears in exact sequence in identical words (with very minor modifications) in the eight sites mentioned above. There are two similar series of Rock Edicts in Jaugada and Dhauli in Orissa, that is, in ancient Kalinga. They differ from the rest in one major and most significant factor. The crucial Rock Edict XIII which expresses Aśoka’s heartfelt repentance on the miseries he caused to the people of Kalinga is missing, along with Rock Edicts XI and XII. If these three Edicts were simply dropped from the series, it could have been explained as an omission by the scribes. What strikes our attention is that **in their place two other Edicts have been inserted** (emphasis mine) which are specifically addressed to the Mahāmātras stationed at Samāpā and Tosālī.

According to this, the only reason for omitting RE XIII could have been that Aśoka considered its contents unsuitable for the people of Kalinga. Then arises the question: Why? Was there any reason why Aśoka had to keep away from his Kalingan subjects, the fact that he repented the havoc he created there or that it was that war which changed his entire imperialist policy?

There is no doubt room for a sneaking suspicion that there is something very strange if Aśoka considered the contents of RE XIII to be unsuitable for his subjects in Kalinga at either Jaugada or Dhauri. What exactly is it that he did not want them to know? The number of casualties? His repentance? Or the “softening” of his militaristic policy? [54]

Sanjeev Sanyal summarizes this succinctly:

According to the official narrative, Ashoka was horrified by his own brutality and became a Buddhist and a pacifist. However, as we have seen, he was already a practicing Buddhist when he invaded Kalinga. Moreover, from what we know of his early rule, he was hardly a man to be easily shocked by the sight of blood. The main evidence of his repentance comes from his own inscriptions. However, it is very curious that this “regret” is mentioned only in locations far away from Odisha (such as in Shahbazgarhi in north-western Pakistan). None of the inscriptions in Odisha express any remorse; any hint of regret is deliberately left out.

Surely, if Ashoka was genuinely remorseful, he would have bothered to apologize to the people whom he had wronged. Far from it, he does not even offer to free the captives. [55]

This not only creates doubt regarding Ashoka’s sincerity regarding his apologies or repentance, but also raises questions if there was an ulterior motive there. As I will show later, that far from being sincere, Ashoka indeed had an ulterior motive, which was to propagate of a socialist polity (more in the nature of a “Welfare State”) in his domain. Therefore statement of the nature of the “loss of life caused by battle, reprisals, deportations and the turmoil that always exists in the aftermath of war so horrified Asoka that it brought about a complete change in his personality” [56] are not true at all and have no basis in evidence or action, except his own words. Anand Guruge very rightly says that Ashoka was a “discerning propagandist who drafted his messages to suit their recipients.” [57]

Kalinga War and the Deafening Textual Silence

Another bizarre point is the complete absence of *any* reference to Kalinga War in *any* of the literary sources in the context of Ashoka Maurya. Here is a war which was so horrific and so fierce that in “aftermath of the battle, Daya River flowing next to the battlefield turned completely red because of the bloodshed.” Even a battle-hardened Emperor underwent a complete transformation after being witness to the devastation and carnage and being “deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation.” Yet none of the Buddhist texts talk about this “life-changing” event. The Ashokavadana, a North Indian text which was supposedly very near in time and geography to Ashoka, should have mentioned *at least something* about Kalinga War, its horrific aftermath and Ashok’s conversion to Buddhism. It does not. A.L. Basham is puzzled at this complete absence of one of the most significant events and a major turning-point in Ashoka’s life in *all* Buddhist texts:

The Kalinga war, which, according to the 13th Rock Edict, was the main factor in Asoka’s conversion to Buddhism, is not mentioned either in the Theravada tradition or in the Ashokavadana, which, since it was transmitted mainly in Mahayana circles, we shall refer to as the Mahayana tradition, though it was not originally a Mahayana work. **Asoka’s own account of his remorse, incidentally, is so striking that it is hard to believe that it made no impression on the compilers of the stories in the two Buddhist traditions.** (Emphasis mine) Yet nothing like it is mentioned in either. This is particularly surprising in the case of the Ashokavadana, since this tradition grew up in northern India, at the time when Asoka’s own inscriptions were still easily intelligible. One would expect the compilers of this cycle of legends to have recorded the story of the Kalinga war and Asoka’s repentance and embroidered it with many supernatural incidents. Instead, they ignored it. [58]

Ananda Guruge in fact wonders whether Kalinga War was an event made up by Ashoka to impress far-away subjects and goes on to say:

The whole episode on the Kalinga war and its consequences was more imaginary than real. It would then be only an attractive story, presented in vivid colour, to impress those who were far removed from the scene both by distance and time and hence unable to verify its truth or accuracy. ... In spite of the richness of details and

the general historical reliability of the Buddhist literary sources in both Pali and Sanskrit, **they are altogether silent on a Kalinga episode** (emphasis mine). As far as they are concerned, such a war had not been responsible for the conversion of Aśoka the Wicked to Aśoka the Righteous. [\[59\]](#)

Ashoka's Dharma and Egalitarianism

Ashoka is widely accepted to have emphasized respect for all religious teachers, the virtues of Ahimsa (non-harm) and equal respect for and study of each other's scriptures. Ashoka may have been strong proponent of Buddhism, yet he is said to have practiced tolerance toward all other religions like Hinduism (Vedic religion), Jainism and Ajivika sect. Many scholars opine that Ashoka's Dhamma was a superb documentation of his essential humanity and an answer to the socio-political needs of the times. He had great respect from Brahmins as well as Shramanas as documented in many of his rock edicts, and according to experts on Buddhist studies this is a proof that he was not anti-Vedic as a minority of scholars allege. Ven. S. Dhammika says:

“While he was an enthusiastic Buddhist, he was not partisan towards his own religion or intolerant of other religions. He seems to have genuinely hoped to be able to encourage everyone to practice his or her own religion with the same conviction that he practiced his. [60]

When we read his Rock Edicts, we get a similar impression. From Rock Edict 5, we come to know that Ashoka appointed a Ministry of Buddhism known as Dharma Mahamatras in 255 BCE, who would be involved in propagating Dhamma both within and outside his domain. During this period, Ashoka therefore began his foreign Dharmavijaya.

In the past there were no Dhamma Mahamatras but such officers were appointed by me thirteen years after my coronation. Now they work among all religions for the establishment of Dhamma, for the promotion of Dhamma, and for the welfare and happiness of all who are devoted to Dhamma. They work among the Greeks, the Kambojas, the Gandharas, the Rastrikas, the Pitinikas and other peoples on the western borders. They work among soldiers, chiefs, Brahmans, householders, the poor, the aged and those devoted to Dhamma — for their welfare and happiness — so that they may be free from harassment. They (Dhamma Mahamatras) work for the proper treatment of prisoners, towards their unfettering, and if the Mahamatras think, “This one has a family to support,” “That one has been bewitched,” “This one is old,” then they work for the release of

such prisoners. They work here, in outlying towns, in the women's quarters belonging to my brothers and sisters, and among my other relatives. They are occupied everywhere. These Dhamma Mahamatras are occupied in my domain among people devoted to Dhamma to determine who is devoted to Dhamma, who is established in Dhamma, and who is generous. [61]

With regards to Ashoka's Dhamma, most scholars are of the opinion that it was not a specific religion, certainly not Buddhism; but rather generalized norms of social behavior and activities, aimed at solving some of most important problems and tensions faced by society. Ashoka's Dhamma was not a formal religion, but a code of conduct, that was intended to be acceptable to people belonging to any religion or community. Ashoka requested his subjects to practice tolerance of different religious sects and ensure communal harmony. Who can object to religious tolerance, compassion towards slaves and servants, obedience to elders and generosity towards the needy?

Ishwara Topa in his critical analysis of Ashoka's Dhamma in his book *Ashoka's Humanism* says:

The word Dhamma, as used in the edicts signifies morality in the broadest sense of the term. Thus in the textual meaning Dhamma is a self-culturalising principle for the general development of man in his individual as well as social capacities. Dhamma is not a creed of a particular sect. It is neither a negative assertion, nor a No to the urges of Life. Dhamma is assertive, positive, and a big Yea to Life. It squares with the basic principles of all religions of the world which claim the remaking of man on lines that promote human qualities and faculties. [62]

Now let us hear what Ashoka, the man himself has to say about his Dhamma [63].

1. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart.

2. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, honors both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honors them with gifts and honors of various kinds.
3. There should be growth in the essentials of all religions. Growth in essentials can be done in different ways, but all of them have as their root restraint in speech, that is, not praising one's own religion, or condemning the religion of others without good cause. And if there is cause for criticism, it should be done in a mild way. But it is better to honor other religions for this reason. By so doing, one's own religion benefits, and so do other religions, while doing otherwise harms one's own religion and the religions of others.
4. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good.
5. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

These are such profound sentences that one cannot help feel moved by the earnestness and sincerity of this great King. Ishwara Topa summarizes Ashoka's internal conflict – the conflict between the principles of the "political state" as espoused by his illustrious ancestors, the Mauryas and the debasement and dehumanization of the personality of man.

The Kalinga War opened Ashoka's eyes to inherent dangers in the perpetuation of the supreme political organization for human welfare. Ashoka so intensely visualized the soul-killing nature of the political state that his hatred for political principles, guiding and controlling the life of the state, set deep reactions in his heart. [64]

But ...

But then when one starts digging *a little* deeper and stops viewing 200 BCE life through a postmodern lens, a completely different picture emerges. I will provide a plethora of evidence to demonstrate that not only was Ashoka *not* a multiculturalist and believer in pluralism, he was in fact an ardent follower of Buddhism and spent a large part of his life

proselytizing and spreading Buddhism and criticizing and persecuting other faiths. In this respect the parallels between Ashoka, his missions and his denigration of other religions is uncannily similar to St Paul's mission to spread Christianity and destroy pagan religions.

Buddhism the True Doctrine

Ashoka used the state machinery to spread Buddhism both within his kingdom and beyond. To the existing cadres of Rajukas and Mahamatras, he added a specialized elite group of Religious Ministers called Dharma-Mahamatras whose sole job was to spread the *dhamma*, among all subjects including those of other faiths. There has always been a debate among scholars whether Ashoka was actually a Buddhist or not, and some even believe that given Ashoka's egalitarian views it is unlikely that he was Buddhist, and that his Dhamma had "no doctrinal or sectarian connotation whatever." However John Strong clearly demonstrates Ashoka's strong commitment to Buddhism:

In a number of edicts, Aśoka appears to indicate his patronage of the Buddhist cause; he leaves an inscription at Lumbinī to record his pilgrimage to the Buddha's birthplace; he declares his reverence for the Triple Gem; he recounts his visit to Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment; and, at one point, he even takes it upon himself to recommend certain sūtras to the community of monks. [65]

Anand Guruge refutes the statement that "the teachings of the Buddha are not mentioned anywhere" in the Rock Edicts by referring to the Minor Rock Edict III at Bairat (Babhru) which with:

...seven identifiable discourses of the Buddha have been presented by Aśoka to his co-religionists — the religious and the lay — as his recommended anthology of readings from the Buddhist Canon. Equally significant are wordperfect direct quotations from the Tripiṭaka which are found in the edicts. [66]

Romila Thapar after a "careful study of the inscriptions" comes to the conclusion that Ashoka, "as a firm believer in Buddhism, was convinced that it was the only way to salvation." [67] Ashoka continued supporting the Buddhist cause monetarily till his last breath, and even after the state treasury had run out of money and was on the verge of bankruptcy.

Such was his fanatic devotion to Buddhism. Henry Karlson summarizes the situation well:

That is, Ashoka, having himself become a pauper, showed that anyone, rich or poor, could find something to give to benefit the Sangha. To the rich, they could imitate the greatness of Ashoka when he was in full possession of his wealth; to the poor, they could look at him as an example of what they, too, could do, since everyone has something they can give. [68]

In the Sri Lankan Pali text Mahavamsa, there is an incident involving the exchange of missions with Sri Lanka, which is described as follows[69]:

The lord of men (i.e. Aśoka) sent envoys with the gift of the true doctrine, saying: “I have taken refuge in the Buddha, his doctrine and his Order, I have declared myself a lay disciple in the religion of the Sakya son; seek then even thou (i.e. Devānampiya Tissa), O best of men, converting thy mind with believing heart, refuge in these best of gems.”

Based on the evidence, one could argue that Ashoka’s view of religion was exclusivist, although not to the same degree as modern day Abrahamic faiths. The very notion that Buddhism was a “true doctrine” has an implied assumption that other belief systems were not true or less true or maybe even false. Taken to an extreme logical end, one could draw interesting parallels today in the rise of fundamentalism among some sections of Christians and Muslims, who each believe that only their God is true and all other Gods are false, and thus missionary conversion, or religious wars are the only valid means of turning everyone to believers.

Dhamma Mahamatras

In those very same edicts where Ashoka espouses his views on religious tolerance, he goes on to say about the assigned work of his Dhamma Mahamatras:

I have also ordered that they should be occupied with the affairs of the Brahmans and the Ajivikas. I have ordered that they be occupied with the Niganthas. In fact, I have ordered that different Mahamatras be occupied with the particular affairs of all different

religions. And my Dhamma Mahamatras likewise are occupied with these and other religions.

Dhamma Mahamatra is an officer of the Ministry of Buddhism. As per the above order personnel of Ashoka's religious ministers were to be involved in the affairs of other religions like Jainism, Ajivika and other Hinduism. A modern day equivalent of the above statement would be: "I am a secular person but a devout Christian and I honor Hindus, Jains and Muslim. My Christian Religious Police is therefore closely involved with all affairs of Hindus, Jains and Muslims."

Ludicrous as this may sound, this is exactly what Ashoka is saying. In my opinion Ashoka's message could be interpreted as: "You can follow any religion as long as it is Buddhism."

Anti-Vedic

Ashok was staunchly anti-Hindu, or anti-Vedic, and openly declares that he does not approve of Vedic rituals (1st Rock Edict). He says: "Here, no living thing having been killed, is to be sacrificed; nor is the holding of a festival permitted. For the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, sees much evil in festivals, though there are some of which the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, approves."

Ashoka was clearly opposed to Vedic yajnas. Despite proclaiming to the world loudly that "that all religions should reside everywhere," he adds a disclaimer that he was strictly opposed to "those rites and rituals which are central to Hinduism and which the dharmasāstras prescribe as obligatory sacraments (saṃskāra)."[\[70\]](#) Ashoka himself in Rock Edict IX conveys his contempt, disdain and utter lack of respect for Hindu Vedic rites and rituals.

Thus said King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods. People perform various auspicious ceremonies on the occasions of illness, the weddings of sons, the weddings of daughters, the birth of children and the setting out on journeys. On these and similar other occasions, people perform many auspicious ceremonies. And on such occasions, the womenfolk in particular perform many and diverse ceremonies which are **trivial and meaningless** (emphasis mine).

However as far as Buddhist ceremonies and rituals are concerned Ashoka does not see them in the same vein and in fact has his support behind such ceremonies because they were apparently “timeless.”^[71] He says: “But the ceremony of the Dhamma is timeless. Even if it does not achieve its purpose in this world, it produces great merit in the next, whereas if it does achieve its purpose in this world, one gets great merit both here and there through the ceremony of the Dhamma.”

Expulsion of Dissident Monks and Nuns

Not only was Ashoka opposed to other religions, he was in fact against any sort of dissent even within Buddhism fold. Romila Thapar explains it very well:

Even more forceful is the Schism Edict issued at three major monastic centres, at Kosambī, Sānchi and Sarnath. It has been argued that this edict was issued after the Council of Pāṭaliputra. The king takes it upon himself to order the expulsion of dissident monks and nuns. It certainly is suggestive of an attitude towards dissidents subsequent to the correct doctrine being established. But, on the other hand, it **does go rather contrary to his appeal for tolerance among all sects and opinions** (emphasis mine), which is voiced in the Major Rock Edicts.^[72]

Slaughter of Jains and Ajivikas

These shocking incidents, which many dub a “genocide” happened chronologically after the Kalinga War and his so-called conversion to Buddhism. Ashoka ordered the execution by beheading of all Ajivikas in North Bengal when someone drew a satirical religious image. Around 18,000 followers of Ajivika way of life were slaughtered in this carnage.

In another incident, he announced a reward of 1 *dinara* (gold coin) for each Nirgrantha (Jain) head brought to him after beheading. Thousands of Jains lost their lives. I will talk about these events in details later.

Let us now briefly summarize the evidence:

1. Ashoka was a devout Buddhist
2. His official state religion was Buddhism and he used the state machinery to propagate and impose Buddhism, and to convert

people.

3. Despite some of his royal proclamations to the contrary, Ashoka had absolutely no regard for Vedic Hindus as evidenced by his actions and other proclamations.
4. He persecuted Jains and Ajivikas.
5. He in fact did not even allow for dissent within the Buddhist fold and expelled nuns and monks.

As is clearly evident, far from being a secular king who promoted the equality of all religions, Ashoka was a religious despot. He literally shoved his religion down other people's throat, and persecuted those whom he felt insulted his religion. The Buddhist text themselves portray Ashoka as a religious fundamentalist who had no tolerance, leave alone respect for people of other denominations.

Ashoka is therefore the *first king in South Asia* to use state machinery to impose and spread his religion, and persecute other sects, something which had never happened before, and something which did not re-occur till 1947 when newly formed state of Pakistan used the state machinery to impose Islam as official religion in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and persecuted religious minorities. Moreover, the parallels between Ashoka unleashing violence on someone drawing a satirical religious picture, and of modern day Islamic fundamentalists unleashing violence on Charlie Hebdo office for printing satirical religious cartoons is uncanny.

[\[73\]](#)[\[74\]](#)

Ashoka's Moral and Social Outlook

In Minor Rock Edict 2, Ashoka says: “Father and mother should be respected and so should elders, kindness to living beings should be made strong and the truth should be spoken... a teacher should be honoured by his pupil and proper manners should be shown towards relations.”

In the 3rd Rock Edict of the 14 Rock Edicts, he says: “Respect for mother and father is good, generosity to friends, acquaintances, relatives, Brahmans and ascetics is good, not killing living beings is good...”

In the 11th of the 14 Rock Edicts, he says: “And it consists of this: proper behavior towards servants and employees, respect for mother and father, generosity to friends, companions, relations, Brahmans and ascetics, and not killing living beings.”

However, Ashoka himself admits that all this is not something new but rather “an ancient rule that conduces to long life.”[\[75\]](#) In a way he was merely re-packaging ancient and widely prevalent Hindu wisdom as his “dhamma.” This is perhaps the earliest example of what noted scholar Rajiv Malhotra refers to as “digestion” of a culture.[\[76\]](#)

Scholars say that Ashoka made State resources available for useful public works like cultivation of medical herbs, for building rest-houses, for digging of wells and planting shade trees. Ashoka himself went on tours to track the progress of such projects. In the 7th pillar of the 7 Pillar Edicts, Ashoka proudly proclaims: “Along roads I have had banyan trees planted so that they can give shade to animals and men, and I have had mango groves planted. At intervals of eight *krosas*, I have had wells dug, rest-houses built, and in various places, I have had watering-places made for the use of animals and men.” In the 2nd of the 14 Rock Edicts, Ashoka says:

Everywhere has Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, made provision for two types of medical treatment: medical treatment for humans and medical treatment for animals. Wherever medical herbs suitable for humans or animals are not available, I have had them imported and grown. Wherever medical roots or fruits are not available I have had them imported and grown. Along roads I have had wells dug and trees planted for the benefit of humans and animals.

And then he finally admits that “these are but minor achievements” as such things **“have been done by former kings.”** In other words, Ashoka was not doing something new or something which had never been done. He in fact confesses[77] that main reason for his “social work” is to attract people to the path of Buddhism, “I have done these things for this purpose, that the people might practice the Dhamma.” All this Rock Edict evidence has often been selectively used by scholars to further their “Buddhism Good, Hinduism Bad” agenda. Koenraad Elst sums it up well when he says that a “bad case of the political abuse of history concerns Ashoka, glorified by Jawaharlal Nehru as the emperor who was first bad and Hindu, then “converted” to Buddhism and became good. This willfully distorting spin has led to the ignoring of an earlier testimony which suggests a different story.”[78]

Ashoka: An Alternate History

Below is a reconstruction of an alternate history of Ashoka based on his Rock Edicts and texts like the Ashokavadana, Mahavamsa and others.

Ashoka's Family

Ashoka's father was Bindusara. He had sixteen wives and 101 sons, as per Sri Lankan tradition (Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa). Ashoka's mother is known as Subhadraangi, daughter of a Brahmin, as per North Indian Buddhist texts, while she is referred to as Dharma, daughter of an Ajivika saint Janasana, as per Sri Lankan tradition. Out of the 101 brothers, the texts refer to only three of them:

- Susima or Sumana, the eldest
- Ashoka
- Vitashoka or Tisya

Ashoka's father Bindusara and his chief queen Shubhadraangi were believers of Ajivika sect[\[79\]](#), and as per Ashokavadana Ajivika sect reached its greatest popularity during Bindusara's time. Pundravardhana (current day North Bengal region of West Bengal and northern Bangladesh) was a stronghold of the Ajivikas. Prince Vitashoka, the brother of Ashoka was a great patron of the Ajivikas initially but later converted to Buddhism.

Young Ashoka was serving as a Viceroy either at Ujjain or Diu where he had been sent to stop a revolt against Susima's misrule. After a second revolt, Ashoka ascended the throne in what many scholars dub a "disputed succession." Ashoka had a large family with many brothers and sisters, who were all settled in and around Pataliputra and sons and grandsons who were all maintained at royal expenses. He had a deep love and affection for children and talked about their welfare in many Edicts.

Ashoka's first wife was known as Vedis-Mahadevi (as per Mahabodhivamsa). They had a son called Mahinda and a daughter Sanghamitta who was married to Ashoka's nephew Agnibrahma. Ashoka's chief queen was Asadhmitra and his third wife was Padmavati, the daughter of Dharmavivardhana also known as Kunala. Tisarakshita was the last chief queen of Ashoka.

Early Life

Ashoka Maurya belonged to the illustrious Maurya clan. His grandfather was the great emperor Chandragupta Maurya and his father was Bindusara. Bindusara had a son whose name was Susima.

306 BCE

Around 306 BCE or thereabouts, a Brahmin girl from Champa was offered in marriage to King Bindusara by her father. She was considered to be “an auspicious and praiseworthy celestial maiden” and became a part of his harem. Initially she used to handle Bindusara’s grooming needs and later when their marriage got consummated, Ashoka was born to them.[\[80\]](#)

304 BCE

Ashoka was born in 304 BCE. He was named Ashoka because his mother became “without sorrow.” He was however born with a skin defect and was hence “hideous to look at.”[\[81\]](#) His father Bindusara did not like him, because he was ugly.[\[82\]](#) Susima his brother (half-brother) was a favorite of Bindusara and was being groomed as heir-apparent.

302 BCE

Ashoka’s brother Vitashoka was born.[\[83\]](#)

287 BCE[\[84\]](#)

Bindusara decided to perform a test to see which of his sons would be capable of running the kingdom after him. He employed a wandering ascetic known as Pingalavatsajiva to examine the princes and to share his feedback. Pingalavatsajiva made an assessment of the princes’ world-views and capabilities based on an inspection of their vehicle, vessel, food and drink and concluded that Ashoka was the most suitable person to lead the empire, but he was also aware of Bindusara’s fondness for Susima and his utter contempt for Ashoka.

So he shared his findings with Bindusara in generic terms by indicating the characteristic of the future king, without naming anybody specific. Thus saying he left. Also aware that Bindusara could interrogate

him someday in future, the ascetic Pingalavatsajiva left the kingdom and spent the rest of his life in exile in a neighboring state.[\[85\]](#)

285 BCE

During his stay at Ujjain, Ashoka met Devi, the daughter of a local merchant, with whom he fell in love. Although they did not marry, he had two children with Devi – Mahinda and Sanghamitta. Thus both Mahinda and Sanghamitta were his illegitimate children.

284 BCE

Ashoka's son Mahinda is born.

282 BCE

Ashoka's daughter Sanghamitta is born.

275 BCE

Ashoka was well-known for his administrative and leadership qualities and successfully quelled many rebellions, while his brother Susima was not that successful.[\[86\]](#) The north-western city of Takshashila (in present day Pakistan) revolted against Bindusara. Bindusara dispatched Ashoka to quell the rebellion. Hearing of his arrival, the people of Takshashila welcomed Ashoka and explained that the people were merely protesting against the atrocities of the ministers and that their complaints were not reaching Pataliputra in the east. Similar revolts were happening all over the north-west, which Ashoka was able to subdue and quell.[\[87\]](#)

272 BCE

In 272 BCE, another rebellion started in Takshashila. Susima, the heir-apparent was out there trying to quell the rebellion but failing miserably. Unfortunately Bindusara fell ill and started coughing up blood. He realized that his end was near. He wanted Susima to be brought back and installed on the throne while he preferred Ashoka to go there and handle the rebellion.

Bindusara's ministers, who had colluded with Ashoka earlier, convinced the dying king that Ashoka would not be in a position to go to Takshashila and that Ashoka would make a better successor than Susima and they tried to have him declared the next king.[\[88\]](#) However there was

strong disapproval from Bindusara who would have none of it. There was a huge showdown and in this process Bindusara breathed his last in front of Ashoka and the ministers, with the succession issues remaining undecided.

Hearing the news of his father's death, Susima rushed back to Pataliputra, the royal capital and found that Ashoka had taken over^[89] the city with the help of Greek mercenaries. Ashoka killed his step-brother and the legitimate heir by tricking him into entering a pit with live coals. In another version "Sushima who enters battle to assert his rights comes to his end by falling into a trap laid for him by Ashoka's minister."^[90]^[91]

271 BCE

Susima, also known as Sumana in the Mahavamsa, had a consort who had the same name Sumana. At the time of Susima's death, she was pregnant. She escaped from Pataliputra and escaped to a Chandala village where she gave birth to a boy called Nigrodha (or Nyagrodha).^[92]

271 BCE to 268 BCE

It is during these 4 years that Ashoka entered into a war of succession against his brothers and had them killed. Soon after his ascension Ashoka killed all male rivals in his family. Pali traditional sources indicate that Ashoka killed ninety-nine half-brothers and only spared his full brother Tissa^[93]. There are slight differences between the Northern and Southern Buddhist tradition in this regard, but in the words of Radhakumud Mookerji both these traditions

...agree as regards the disputed succession, which may therefore be taken as a fact ... According to the Mahabodhivamsa, as already stated, these 98 brothers with their leader, Yuvaraja Sumana, were slain in the course of the war of succession they had forced on Ashoka, whom they regarded as usurper. ^[94]

268 BCE

Ashoka was thus crowned emperor in 268 B.C.E and held the epithet "Devanam Priyah Priyadarshi Raja" meaning "The Favorite of Gods, the good looking King".

Coronation to Conversion

267 BCE

Ashoka's character changed for the worse as soon as he ascended the throne. He became a power-crazy monster, notorious for his cruelty, bad temper, sadist streak and was hence also known as "Chanda Ashoka" or "Fierce Ashoka." Ashoka would often order his ministers around to undertake gross and shocking commands, and when they would not obey to the letter, he would have them killed. The *Ashokavadana*[\[95\]](#) clearly records that in a single day Ashoka had 500 of his ministers killed because he believed that they were not loyal enough.

267 BCE

Similarly on another occasion, Ashoka had 500 women in his harem burnt alive when some of them insulted him.[\[96\]](#)

265 BCE

In the Buddhist scheme of things such punishment and torture was not something novel, and the *Bala Pandita Sutta*, an important Buddhist text, lists all types of punishment and torture a king inflicted on a thief or criminal, where having one's head chopped off with a sword was considered the most gentle of punishments.[\[97\]](#) Apparently Ashok meted out such punishment himself, and his friend and minister Radhagupta advised Ashoka to use an executioner for future executions.[\[98\]](#)

A person called Girika was appointed as the Royal Executioner of Ashoka's kingdom. Girika was the son of a weaver, and was a sadist and cruel person from his childhood and was hence also known as Chanda-Girika or Girika the Cruel. Girika was so vicious that he killed his own parents because they did not want him to become Ashoka's executioner. He is reported to have said: "My parents did not like the job and they argued with me! However, I have silenced their voice, with the help of the sword."[\[99\]](#)

Girika became the official executioner of Ashoka and his close friend. In Girika, Ashoka had found a perfect sadist partner. Together with him, Ashoka had an elaborate torture chamber constructed, termed as the "hell on earth" or Ashoka's Hell in Pataliputra (modern Patna, India), the

capital city of the Maurya Empire. It was disguised as a beautiful and attractive palace full of amenities such as exclusive baths, it was decorated with flowers, fruit trees and ornaments. Hieun Tsang, the famous Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled to India in 630 CE “claims to have actually seen the pillar marking the site of Ashoka’s hell”.[\[100\]](#)

A typical torture in Ashoka’s Hell was to pry open victim’s mouths with an iron and pouring boiling copper down their throats.[\[101\]](#) Ashoka made a pact with Girika that he would never allow anyone who entered the palace to exit alive, including Ashoka himself. Hence by disguising the torture chamber as a beautiful and “enticing” palace they would trap innocent onlooker and bystanders, and Ashoka would get great sadistic pleasure in seeing his victims tortured and killed by his executioner friend Girika. Another torture in Ashoka’s Hell was the torture of the five-fold tether - driving two iron stakes through their hands, driving two iron stakes through their feet and driving one iron stake through their heart.

In the course of time, a Sramana called Samudra came to the town of Pataliputra, and while begging on the streets chanced upon the “Palace of Carnage.” He was imprisoned by Girika, and his death was fixed for 7 days later. In the meanwhile, a youth who had become involved in an affair with one of Ashoka’s queens, was caught. Both the prince and the queen, were imprisoned and tortured and pounded to death. The Sramana was horrified and deeply impacted by the savagery and carnage in the execution palace, and this changed him completely. He realized Buddha’s teachings and became an Arhat.[\[102\]](#)

“Having seen this dreadful scene with his own eyes, his mind detached itself from the physical world. Reflecting on this the whole night, he became free from all worldly bonds. Thus he attained Arahantship.”[\[103\]](#)

265 BCE to 264 BCE

This is the period when Ashoka started becoming associated with Buddhism. There were two incidents which facilitated his acceptance of Buddhism.

Incident #1

The first incident was Samudra's attainment of Arahantship described above. When Ashoka heard the news about a Sramana attaining Arahantship in an execution-house, his curiosity was piqued. He became greatly influenced by the Arhat who made him promise to give up his evil ways and to work for the betterment of society and for spreading the Dharma of Buddha. Ashoka later ordered his executioner friend Girika to be burnt alive and demolished the Execution Palace.

Incident #2

The second incident was Ashoka's interaction with Nigrodha his 7-year old nephew who was now a Realized Soul. The incident is narrated in the Sri Lankan Buddhist text Mahavamsa.[\[104\]](#) Once when Ashoka was staring out of his window he saw Nigrodha, a peaceful ascetic, a young boy passing on the street. He was strangely attracted to the peaceful demeanor of Nigrodha and invited him to his court. It was then that Nigrodha preached the Doctrine of Buddhism to Ashoka and at this time Ashoka adopted Buddhism.

263 BCE

According to tradition, during this time Ashoka started his quest to acquire merit as ordained by Buddhist teachings. According to traditional Buddhist mythology, after his death, Buddha was cremated and the ashes and remains were to be divided among his disciples, however there were disagreements among the various related parties. To avoid fighting, a monk divided the relics into ten portions. His relics were then enshrined and worshipped in stupas by the royals of eight countries. Ashoka decided to construct 84,000 stupas and re-distribute Buddha's holy relics throughout the country.

During this process he had to retrieve the relics kept in 8 vaults known as "Drona Stupas" which had been constructed by 8 earlier kings. [\[105\]](#) The 8th stupa was a challenge as it was under the protection of the Nagas,[\[106\]](#) who had to be convinced to part with it, yet Ashoka managed to obtain the relics from that stupa as well and proceeded with the construction of 84,000 Buddhist viharas all across India.

After this Ashoka's character got transformed, and instead of Chandashoka (Ashoka, the Fierce), he now became known as Dharmashoka

(Ashoka, the Righteous). Despite his conversion to Ashoka the Righteous, his penchant for extreme cruelty remained active. Once Ashoka demanded from his ministers that they bring him the heads of different animals including human to teach them a moral lesson. [\[107\]](#)

262 BCE

262 BCE was a very significant year as three major incidents occurred in close succession.

1. Ashoka's son Mahinda became a Buddhist monk and his daughter Sanghamitta became a nun.
2. Ashoka's brother Vitashoka converted to Buddhism from Ajivika faith.
3. Ashoka's son Kunala was born.

Ashoka's brother Vitashoka converted to Buddhism from Ajivika faith. The Ashokavadana narrates [\[108\]](#) the story behind Vitashoka's conversion. Although Ashoka had adopted Buddhism and so had many of his subjects, his own brother Vitashoka was still a follower of the Ajivika sect. Vitashoka used to believe that liberation was not possible for Buddhist monks as they lived in opulence and luxury. Once on a hunting trip to a forest, Vitashoka met an Ajivika ascetic who lived an extreme life of austerity. Yet even under such austere conditions, the ascetic would be filled with lust when he saw forest animals having intercourse.

Ashoka decided to teach Vitashoka a lesson, and the story goes that Vitashoka was forced to occupy Ashoka's throne for 7 days. Ashoka ordered that as Vitashoka was a usurper, he would be beheaded after 7 days, but in the meantime he would be eligible to enjoy all royal pleasures. With the scepter of death looming, Vitashoka could not enjoy anything. After 7 days, when Vitashoka explained that he had not been able to enjoy much, Ashoka confessed that this was just a ploy. He had merely wanted to teach Vitashoka a lesson. Just as a person who thinks constantly about death cannot be attracted to any luxury, so too the Buddhist monks ever thinking of the impending death cannot be attracted to "objects of luxury or sensual pleasure". Vitashoka was then apparently attracted to Buddhism and converted.

I have often wondered, what would have happened if things had not gone as planned? Would Ashoka have made good of his order and beheaded his brother Vitashoka? What we can conclude from the above story, in the context of Ashoka's fratricide and disposition towards violence, is that Ashoka was *quite* willing to sacrifice his brother's life if need be for the propagation of his faith Buddhism. In this respect, Ashoka is similar to many modern day religious fundamentalists who are prepared to kill even their families for a missionary cause!

Romila Thapar summarizes the situation as below: "Younger brothers can often stand in the way of a king, particularly a king as individualistic as Ashoka. In this case the young brother may have realized that becoming a monk and renouncing all claims to the throne might spare him his life at the hands of Ashoka." [\[109\]](#)

261 BCE

The construction of 84,000 viharas got completed. The simultaneous inauguration of 84,000 viharas was done on a solar eclipse day. Ashoka was now officially Dharmashoka (Ashoka the Pious) and no longer Chandashoka (Ashoka the Fierce).

Kalinga War to Ajivika Genocide

260 BCE

Ironically it was the very next year when Ashoka orchestrated the massively destructive Kalinga War (in present day Odisha) where lakhs of people were slaughtered. As per accounts of Megasthenes, the king of Kalinga was “protected by a standing army, numbering 60,000 infantry, 1000 cavalry and 700 war elephants. This army must have considerably expanded by the time of Ashoka, when the casualties alone is stated to be at least 4 lacs.”[\[110\]](#)

We are not aware of who the king of Kalinga was. Whoever he was, under his leadership, the people of Kalinga put up a stiff resistance and fought till the end. However, they were vastly outnumbered by Ashoka’s armies. Entire kingdom of Kalinga was destroyed; more than 150,000 Kalinga warriors and about 100,000 of Ashoka’s own warriors were among those slain.

259 BCE

Vitashoka gained Arahantship during this time.

258 BCE

Ashoka went on a pilgrimage to the Sacred Bodhi Tree (as per Rock Edict VIII) and undertook the following activities:

- visits and gifts to Brahmans and ascetics
- visits and gifts of gold to the aged
- visits to people in the countryside
- instructing them in Dhamma, and
- discussing Dhamma with them.

258 BCE

The Nirgranthas, later known as Jains and the Ajivikas were closely related sects which developed at the same time as Buddhism, with primary center in eastern India (present day Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh). Mahavira the founder of Jainism and Gosala the founder of Ajivika faith used to practice austerities together but after some differences arose they parted ways and developed two different sects. However, the differences

between these two sects at that time was not that significant, and they were together often dubbed as heretics by the Buddhists.

One day, a person of Nirgrantha (Jain) faith in Pundravardhana (North Bengal), drew a picture showing the Buddha bowing at the feet of Nirgrantha Jnatiputra (identified with Mahavira, 24th Tirthankara of Jainism). This infuriated Ashoka greatly and he immediately issued an order to kill all the Ajivikas in Pundravardhana. Violent executions started in Ashoka's kingdom and around 18,000 followers of the Ajivika sect were executed as a result of this order. As per Ashokavadana, all Ajivikas in Bengal country were killed.

Ashoka's subjects were also getting agitated by Ashoka's hardline attitude towards other minorities. Another Jain, this time from his capital Pataliputra (Bihar) drew a similar picture. Ashoka had him and his entire family burnt alive in their house. He then announced an award of one *dinara* (silver coin) to anyone who brought him the head of a Nirgrantha heretic. Thousands of Jains died in the ensuing bloodbath. Vitashoka, Ashoka's brother after gaining Arahantship was leading an ascetic life. Vitashoka had a health problem because of which he had lost all his hair. When the Jain killings were going on, Vitashoka unaware, took refuge in the house of a milkman. Mistaking him to be Jain, the cowherd in hope for a *dinara* reward, beheaded Vitashoka.[\[111\]](#) [\[112\]](#)

Incidentally, the genocide of Ajivikas by Ashoka is the first recorded extermination of a religious minority in South Asia. In contemporary society, Ashoka's genocide is comparable in scale to the massacre of Yezidi people in middle-east by the terror group Islamic state. Closer to home today such persecutions are common in theocratic South Asian countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh where minority Christians, Jains and Hindus are systematically persecuted by the state.[\[113\]](#)

Missionary Zeal and the Twilight Years

After the death of his brother Vitashoka as a result of his own orders, Ashoka reduced his use of state violence towards religious minorities. During this time he became closely associated with the Buddhist Sangha and made full use of the State resources to spread his ideology and world-view, both of which were based on Buddhism. From 255 BCE, Ashoka started putting a lot of effort to proselytization or spreading Dhamma (Buddhism). He followed a multi-pronged approach:

- Setting-up of Dhamma Pillars (Socio-Religious Edicts)
- Appointment of Dhamma-Mahamattas (Religious Police)
- Dhamma Proclamation (Religious Proclamations)
- Mufassil Officers of the highest grade had to “go out on circuit tours to give instruction on the Dharma to the people” [114]
- Buddhist Missionaries were sent to Greece, Syria, West Asia, Egypt, North Africa and South India (Chola and Pandya territories)
- Patronizing the Third Buddhist Council in Pataliputra

Some of the notable events during this period are given below.

257 BCE

Ashoka undertook a tour of the empire lasting for 256 days spreading and proselytizing. In the Minor Rock Edict I, Ashoka says:

Now that I have visited the Sangha for more than a year, *I have become very zealous*. Now the people in India who have not associated with the gods do so. This is the result of zeal and it is not just the great who can do this. Even the humble, if they are zealous, can attain heaven. And this proclamation has been made with this aim. Let both humble and great be zealous, let even those on the borders know and let zeal last long. Then this zeal will increase, it will greatly increase, it will increase up to one-and-a-half times. This message has been proclaimed two hundred and fifty-six times by the king while on tour. [115]

256 BCE

Ashoka started the practice of spreading religion by Edicts. In Rock Edict III, Ashoka says: “Everywhere in my domain the Yuktas, the Rajjukas and the Pradesikas shall go on inspection tours every five years for the purpose of Dhamma instruction.”

255 BCE

Ashoka appointed a Ministry of Buddhism known as Dharma Mahamatras, who would be involved in propagating Dhamma both within and outside his domain. During this period, Ashoka began his foreign Dharmavijaya.

254 BCE

Ashoka enlarged the Stupa of Buddha Konakmana or Kanakamuni to double its original size.

251 BCE

Third Buddhist Council

250 BCE

Ashoka’s son Mahinda went to Sri Lanka as part of a Buddhist mission.

249 BCE

Ashoka donated the Khalatika Cave to ascetics to enable them to live above the flood level during rainy season RE

248 BCE

Ashoka visited the birthplace of Buddha and exempted the village of Lumbini from all religious cess. In the Minor Pillar Edict I, Ashoka says: “Twenty years after his coronation, Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, visited this place and worshipped because here the Buddha, the sage of the Sakyans, was born. He had a stone figure and a pillar set up and because the Lord was born here, the village of Lumbini was exempted from tax and required to pay only one eighth of the produce.”

242 BCE

Writing of Pillar Edict IV and V, Pillar Inscription I

239 BCE Onwards

Queen Asandhimittā died and Tissarakkhā (Tishyarakshita) was elevated to rank of Queen. In a major family feud, Tishyarakshita had Ashoka's son Kunala blinded. During this period, Ashoka's health started breaking down, especially after the Kunala incident. His state treasure was getting depleted because of his massive spending on proclaiming Buddhism, and riots and revolts had become common in his kingdom, especially in the North-western part of South Asia. There was one more revolt in Takshashila.

232 BCE

Asoka died in 232 B.C. in the thirty-eighth year of his reign. The entire Mauryan kingdom disintegrated in a few years.

Denial, Postmodernism and Conclusion

The contrast between the two narratives is striking.

In one Ashoka is a just and great emperor, in the other Ashoka is a tyrannical despot with a track-record of immense human-rights violations. In one, he is a secular humanitarian, in the other Ashoka is a religious fundamentalist who systematically eliminates religious minorities using state machinery. In one version, he appoints officials to spread his ethical message, in another he appoints the oppressive Religious Police to ensure strict compliance to Buddhism.

It is as if we are studying two different people altogether. Yet, my study is based on the *exact same texts* as those used in the traditional storyline. In the previous sections, I have presented detailed evidence challenging and refuting the traditional storyline, without recourse to any external theories or extraneous data. I have demonstrated with ample evidence that:

- a. Ashoka was never an important figure ever – despite being such a Great emperor, he was unknown and forgotten in India and outside India he was not known except only in Sri Lanka Buddhist texts
- b. The Ashoka of the rock-edicts appears to have very little in common with Ashoka mentioned in the texts
- c. Ashoka's cruelty is unparalleled; he killed his brothers, to succeed to the throne; he executed ministers who he thought were not loyal enough; he burnt alive women in his harem; he fought the Kalinga war where lakhs of people died and got seriously injured in the carnage and blood-bath; he ordered the genocide of Ajivikas where 18,000 people were killed.
- d. Ashoka was a zealous Buddhist who used state machinery to spread and impose his faith.
- e. Ashoka instituted a religious police to spread his Dhamma, a religious police which had the right to interfere in other religions.
- f. Ashoka did not become a Buddhist as a result of Kalinga War, he was associated with Buddhism from much earlier times.

- g. The corollary of the above is that, Ashoka was a Buddhist when he unleashed the Kalinga war carnage
- h. Ashoka was not even remotely tolerant towards other religions – he openly denigrated Vedic Hindu religion and persecuted Jains and Ajivikas
- i. He admits that his social activities were merely done to spread Buddhism
- j. He also confesses that his social activities, for which he is famed, were not something new and that earlier kings had also done it.

In the mainstream discourse, only evidence which fits the pre-conceived narrative of the greatness of Ashoka is accepted as genuine, all others are deemed irrelevant or fabrications and therefore ignored or rejected when constructing the narrative. It may be fair to say that the way in which the Ashoka narrative and mythicization has been crafted over the last 2 centuries and especially in the post-1947 India, is the *most troublesome* aspect of modern Ashoka studies. This narrative has been disseminated successfully through school and college textbooks.

For example, despite the clear statement in Divyavadana of Ashok's savagery and cruelty and Ashoka's own admission of his cruelty in Kalinga War, one wonders why such evidence wasn't regarded by the historians and experts in Ashoka/Buddhist studies to create their narrative. Why has such evidence been completely ignored? Such questions makes one think if there was an ulterior motive guiding the construction of the Ashoka narrative. Or perhaps a preconceived bias of a certain kind – ideological or theoretical framework of a certain variety. This isn't history writing, this is ideological historiography.

The only way for someone to challenge the newly emerging version of Ashoka narrative is to challenge the evidence itself. *And that is exactly what most scholars and historians do.* Some do so unapologetically while others are more diplomatic. I have presented some of the common denials and excuses below.

Barua, discussed earlier, in 1920, after talking about the Ajivika genocide incident, in the very next line expresses his disbelief and says: "It is inconceivable that king Ashoka was ever implicated in such an atrocious

crime as the Divyavadana would have us believe. The tradition just referred to must be regarded as spurious and baseless.”[116]

Noted historian and Indologist, Bhandarkar in 1925, not only opposes the demonization of Ashoka, he in fact questions the *very validity* of the Buddhist texts and says: “There are, no doubt, some Buddhist works, which set forth his life and work, but their trustworthy character has been rightly called in question. They may mention many stories, which represent him to have been Kalashoka or Black Ashoka before, and Dharmashoka or Pious Ashoka after, his conversion to Buddhism. As the one aim of these works is to eulogize Buddhism by showing how it transformed Ashoka the Ogre into Ashoka the Pious, a suspicion naturally crosses our mind in regard to the correctness of their account.” [117]

Mukhopadhyaya, in 1960, in his critical edition of Ashokavadana, refuses to accept the glaring evidence and like most historians dismisses it out of hand as “absurd”: “Here too Ashoka is described as dreadfully cruel. If the central figure of this story were not a historic personage as great and well-known as Ashoka, we would have nothing to say. To say that Ashoka, whose devotion to all religious sects is unique in the history of humanity (as is well-known through his edicts) persecuted the Jains or the Ajivikas is simply absurd. And why speak of Ashoka alone? There was no Buddhist king anywhere in India who persecuted the Jains or the Ajivikas or any other sect.” [118]

Romila Thapar in 1994 says: “There is the well-known story of the wicked Candāsoka who changes to the pious Dharmāsoka which is, of course, a familiar stereotype in many such sudden conversion stories.” [119]

Ironically and in a demonstration of dishonest scholarship that one has come to associate with many ideologically committed Indian historians today, mainstream scholars use the *same text* Ashokavadana to justify the religious oppressiveness of Hindu ruler Pushyamitra Sunga. There is an incident in Ashokavadana similar to Ashoka’s Ajivika genocide where Pushyamitra offers to pay a Dinara for every Buddhist beheading. This incident is treated as sacrosanct by mainstream historians to justify the cruelty and bigotry of the Hindu king, but a similar incident regarding Ashoka is considered “myth” and “exaggeration.”

A serious academic researcher, who applies similar standards to all parts of the text, should either dismiss both incidents as “myths” and “exaggerations,” or accept that fact both the incidents may have some kernel of truth and merit further investigation. Unfortunately that is not the case as Sanjeev Sanyal[120] discusses in his talk titled “*How Much of Indian History Is Really True?*” “The evidence is very often simply ignored or hidden which is actually a lie” and there is a “blatant misuse of evidence.” This is accompanied by “monopolization of narrative by a relatively small group of people with blatantly political objectives.” He also rues the fact that the same level of skepticism is not applied equally to all parts of literary texts, and only certain parts which adhere to the mainstream narrative are accepted and others are dismissed as later interpolations or myths.[121] Noted Indologist, Koenraad Elst makes a very useful distinction between the alleged atrocities of Buddhist king Ashoka vis-à-vis Hindu king Pushyamitra Sunga. He says:

Hagiographies are notorious for competitive copying (e.g. appropriating the miracle of a rival saint, multiplied by two or more, for one’s own hero); in this case, it may have taken the form of attributing a negative feat of the hero onto the rival.

But there are two differences. Firstly, in the account concerning Pushyamitra, a miracle episode forms a crucial element, and this does not add to the credibility of the whole. And secondly, Ashoka belongs to the writer’s own Buddhist camp, whereas Pushyamitra is described as an enemy of Buddhism. When something negative is said about an enemy (i.e. Pushyamitra), it is wise to reserve one’s acceptance of the allegation until independent confirmation is forthcoming; by contrast, when a writer alleges that his own hero has committed a crime, there is much more reason to presume the correctness of the allegation. In the absence of external evidence, the best thing we can do for now is to draw the logical conclusion from the internal evidence: *the allegation against Pushyamitra is much less credible than the allegation against Ashoka.* (Emphasis mine) [122]

With regards to Ashoka’s expulsion of dissident monks and nuns, discussed earlier, Romila Thapar describes the incident and correctly points out how that goes “rather contrary to his appeal for tolerance among all

sects and opinions.” But then like most Ashoka apologists, she goes on to explain why that is *not* contrary to Ashoka’s secular image: “Possibly a distinction has to be made between the king in his role as a patron of the sangha, even though an upāsaka, and the king as a statesman governing an empire. As a royal patron he rises above sectarian rivalries and donates caves to the Ājīvikas even though there was hostility between them and the Buddhists.” [\[123\]](#)

Radhakumud Mookerji dismisses the cruelty of Ashoka by citing his Kalinga Edict I where Ashoka says: “I desire for my children that they may enjoy every kind of prosperity and happiness both in this world and the next.” In this context, he observes: “A man with such tender solicitude of the welfare of all his relations could not be a monster of cruelty, as the legends represents him to be.” More generally, he writes:

The fact is that these legends were out to emphasize the contrast between the criminal career of Ashoka prior to his conversion and his virtuous conduct that followed it. They were interested in blackening his character to glorify the religion that could transmute base metal into gold, convert Chandashoka to Dharmashoka, and make of a monster of cruelty the simplest of men! [\[124\]](#)

We have seen earlier how Ashoka’s war of succession lasted for 4 years during which he systematically eliminated all the male rivals in his family (99 bothers as per tradition) starting from Susima. Radhakumud Mookerji, again comes to the aid of Ashoka and gives reason why the War of Succession was valid[\[125\]](#):

- Ashoka only murdered one brother for a throne, as rock Edicts indicate that his brothers and sisters were living well under Ashoka’s reign.
- The number of brothers could have been an exaggeration.
- The 98 brothers with Yuvaraja Sumana in the lead initiated war the on Ashoka, believing him to be a usurper.
- Thus “Ashoka could not be held responsible for their death under such circumstances.”

As is evident, there is no dearth of Ashoka apologists. Koenraad Elst expresses[\[126\]](#) his exasperation and rightfully observes:

This just goes to show how far the idealization of Buddhism and Ashoka has gotten out of hand in Nehruvian India. When the modern myth of Ashoka as the great secular-Buddhist ruler is contradicted by an ancient source (one outspokenly favourable to Buddhism and Ashoka) which shows him persecuting rival schools of thought, the modern scholar (a Hindu Brahmin) still insists on upholding the myth, and dismisses the actual information in the ancient source as a “great defect”. Moreover, the non-persecution of other religions, claimed here for Ashoka against the very evidence under discussion, was not unique at all: it was the rule among Hindu kings throughout history, and the Buddha himself had been one of its beneficiaries.

To understand what Ashoka and Nehruvian India have to do with each other, we must try to understand Nehru’s attitude towards Ashoka.

Nehru and Ashoka

“By education I am an Englishman, by views an internationalist, by culture a Muslim, & a Hindu only by accident of birth.”

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India after independence was an avowed socialist and believed that socialism was the inevitable outcome of democracy. To him, political democracy had no meaning if it did not embrace economic democracy or socialism. Nehru looked forward to a “comprehensive planning” for India for employment and for social services, and thought of himself as the Grand Architect of a new India. He wanted full control on all means of production within the country, whether of manufacturing materials or knowledge production, and he and his team would be the central planners of this exercise.

In addition to believing in the “scientific temper” as the need of the hour, he was against superstitions and backwardness which he felt were an integral part of Hinduism and thus he harbored an utter disdain for Hinduism. Nehru wrote in *Discovery of India* that Hinduism was “vague, amorphous”, and “many-sided” and that it was “incorrect and undesirable to use ‘Hindu’ or ‘Hinduism’ for Indian culture, even with reference to the distant past.”

Nehru's praise of an Indian king in itself should raise a red flag to all serious historians and scholars. Nehru, given his Islamic upbringing[127], socialist values, and utter contempt for all things Hindu not surprisingly idolized Ashoka, Babur and Akbar. Nehru therefore had the *greatest* admiration for Ashoka and said: "Aśoka is one of the most magnificent names not only in India's history but in world history." This is echoed in the words of Alan Mann who said, "The history of India records no ruler of Ashoka's stature for the next 18 centuries, until Akbar, a Muslim, who flourished in the 16th Century." [128]

There is, in fact, a rather deep relationship between Nehruvian socialist thought and the massive mythologization of Ashoka in post-independent India. Sanjeev Sanyal popularized this idea in his path-breaking essay *Ashoka, The Not So Great*, where he shares his hypothesis behind the sudden rise in Ashoka's popularity after India's independence.

When it became clear that it was only a matter of time before India would become free of British rule, some leaders of the freedom movement such as Jawaharlal Nehru decided to create a lineage for their socialist leanings. The problem was that India's ancient political texts did not easily lend themselves to this. For instance, the *Arthashastra*, the treatise written by Chandragupta's mentor Chanakya, advocates the main role of the State as ensuring defense, internal security and the rule-of-law; a strong but limited state. It is clearly not a manifesto for the weak but all-pervasive Nehruvian state.

This is when the emerging class of socialist Indian politicians stumbled upon Ashoka's inscriptions. Ashoka clearly speaks of government intervention in the day-to-day lives of his subjects. Indeed, he literally speaks of a nanny State in one of his inscriptions: "Just as a person feels confident having entrusted his child to an expert nurse thinking 'the nurse will keep my child well'; even so the Rajjukas have been appointed by me for the welfare and happiness of the people." [129]

Nehru viewed himself in exactly the same light and similar to Rajjukas wanted "a new type of administrator" to cater to the common man. According to Chitta Ranjan:

Nehru wanted the services to “cease to think of themselves as some select coterie apart from the rest of the people”, and he rejected people with the “coat and necktie” mentality. In other words, he wanted a new type of administrator to emerge, who could identify himself with the common people without effort and who would not become either a tool in the hands of vested interests or a self-seeker without a conscience. [\[130\]](#)

Ashoka then has the unique distinction of being the first socialist in ancient South Asia 2000 years prior to Europe, followed by his ideological prodigy Nehru, the second socialist in South Asia. In one of his Rock Edicts Ashoka very clearly states his Welfare Statist agenda: “All men are my children. I am like a father to them. As every father desires the good and the happiness of his children, I wish that all men should be happy always.”

Considered on a stand-alone basis, this could also be interpreted as the right dharma of a benevolent king who wanted the best for his people, in line with the Indian ethos. However, once we locate this and similar statements, within Ashoka’s general world view and his actions, we are compelled to accept the previous view. In Rock Edict 5, Ashoka tries to portray himself as ultimate social welfare champion, always at the beck and call of his subjects.

In the past, state business was not transacted nor were reports delivered to the king at all hours. But now I have given this order, that at any time, whether I am eating, in the women’s quarters, the bed chamber, the chariot, the palanquin, in the park or wherever, reporters are to be posted with instructions to report to me the affairs of the people so that I might attend to these affairs wherever I am. And whatever I orally order in connection with donations or proclamations, or when urgent business presses itself on the Mahamatras, if disagreement or debate arises in the Council, then it must be reported to me immediately. This is what I have ordered. I am never content with exerting myself or with despatching business. Truly, I consider the welfare of all to be my duty, and the root of this is exertion and the prompt despatch of business. There is no better work than promoting the welfare of all the people and whatever efforts I am making is to repay the debt I owe to all beings to assure their happiness in this life, and attain heaven in the next. [\[131\]](#)

It is not surprising that Nehru being a socialist was a great admirer of Ashoka and wrote: “Aśoka’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 laboured hard at public business and declared he was ready for it.”[\[132\]](#)

The Dharmic world-view is not about socialism or capitalism, but rather about a holistic approach to human progress and development including economic and material development. In Ashoka, Nehru found his perfect role-model whom he could use to justify foisting his alien imported socialist views on Dharmic India. Here was someone who was Indian and clearly anti-Hindu. Ashoka had no sympathy for the religions of the Vedas and Vedic rituals. On top of that, Ashoka makes his socialist vision clear on multiple occasions. In fact Ashoka was the perfect architect of a Nanny State, deciding what, when and how his “children”, the subjects should eat, wear and do in his kingdom. Moreover, Ashoka, similar to modern Left-leaning politicians, did not shy away from giving freebies. Noted Sinhalese writer, D.C. Vijayvardhana calls Ashoka the “Lenin of Buddhism” and talks in details of what he thinks Ashoka’s socialist achievements were:

Aśoka was the Lenin of Buddhism, as he was the first to translate the Buddha’s Way of Life into a polity...Declaring his admiration for the Buddhist ethic, he set up a humane government, whose officials were instructed to provide free medical attention, a compassionate jail administration, poor relief, old age pensions, amenities for travellers and animal hospitals; while he admonished the people to be dutiful to parents, kind to children and servants, charitable and tolerant. Aśoka’s frontier policy was in the same vein; he renounced war as a method of settling disputes, and in a proclamation addressed to the border tribes he told them not to be afraid of him, for his heartfelt desire was to be good to them.

.... Aśoka’s reign was the Golden Age of India. His vast empire became a land of peace and happiness. Here was a ruler who ruled according to the law of the Buddha. Aśoka was imbued with the

spirit of the teaching of the Master, he was one who lived the Law. He looked after the people as a saint looks after humanity. He completely gave himself up to the Master, to the Dhamma, to the Sangha and to the people. Inscribed rocks and stone pillars, still found from Kashmir to Orissa, bear testimony to the extent of Aśoka's Empire, the righteousness and wisdom of his rule and the nobility of his character. His kingdom from plain to mountain-cave was freedom's home. [\[133\]](#)

Ashoka and Multi-Culturalism

Hinduism has historically been an inclusive dharma, within which numerous traditions often significantly different from each other in outward form coexisted without major conflict. Swami Vivekananda says in *Lectures from Colombo to Almora*: “Mind you, we have no quarrel with any religion in the world. We have each our Ishta. But when we see men coming and saying, “This is the only way,” and trying to force it on us in India, we have a word to say; we laugh at them. For such people who want to destroy their brothers because they seem to follow a different path towards God — for them to talk of love is absurd. Their love does not count for much. How can they preach of love who cannot bear another man to follow a different path from their own? If that is love, what is hatred? We have no quarrel with any religion in the world, whether it teaches men to worship Christ, Buddha, or Mohammed, or any other prophet.” [\[134\]](#)

Religious exclusivism, which is the doctrine or belief that only one particular religion or belief system is true, has never been an issue within Hinduism or even among the broader Dharmic faiths including Buddhism and Jainism, despite academic propaganda to the contrary. For thousands of years, people of different traditions within the Dharmic umbrella have *co-existed peacefully* and with *mutual respect* towards each other, except for the few odd politically motivated fights. The traditional method to spread one's religious views in ancient India was debate, unlike force or proselytization which is common to Islam and Christianity.

Religious exclusivism on the other hand, is a common trait of the Abrahamic faiths – Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Religious exclusivism leads to the conviction *that only one religion and one way of life is true and all others are false*, and this leads to conflict between the believers and non-believers (proselytizing, crusades, and jihad). Multiculturalism therefore is

essentially a Western solution to the Western problem of religious intolerance among Western religions. As per Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Multiculturalism is a body of thought in political philosophy about the proper way to respond to cultural and religious diversity ... While multiculturalism has been used as an umbrella term to characterize the moral and political claims of a wide range of disadvantaged groups, including African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled, most theorists of multiculturalism tend to focus their arguments on immigrants who are ethnic and religious minorities (e.g. Latinos in the U.S., Muslims in Western Europe), minority nations (e.g. Catalans, Basque, Welsh, Québécois), and indigenous peoples (e.g. Native peoples in North America, Maori in New Zealand). [\[135\]](#)

Many post-modern scholars and historians belonging to the Marxist tradition, use these Western Abrahamic frameworks of exclusivism and multi-culturalism to evaluate ancient Indian kings. Romila Thapar waxes eloquent about Ashoka's support for plurality, diversity and multi-culturalism: "In his edicts Aśoka defines the main principles of dhamma as non-violence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience to parents, respect to Brahmins and other religious teachers and priests, liberality toward friends, humane treatment of servants and generosity towards all. It suggests a general ethic of behaviour to which no religious or social group could object. It also could act as a focus of loyalty to weld together the diverse strands that made up the empire." [\[136\]](#)

Says Ishwara Topa in the context of Ashoka's support for what is known as multi-culturalism:

The Seventh and Twelfth Girnar Rock edicts are glaring and outstanding examples of the Ashokan principle of tolerance towards all sects residing in the kingdom of Ashoka. He gave them the freedom to follow their religions, but made them realize the importance of "self-control and purity of mind", as enjoined by their religions, in conformity with the basic principles of Dharma. [\[137\]](#)

First of all, on account of changing time-spirit and different cultural/social histories leading to different responses by different

civilizations across time, it may not be appropriate to compare and contrast, pre-Christian Indian emperors like Ashoka and Pushyamitra Sunga subscribing to Dharmic faiths, using 21st century social sciences framework based on Western Universalism and Judeo-Christian metaphysics, and then pronouncing sweeping judgments.

Secondly, even if one were to apply such frameworks, even on that basis, evidence indicates that Ashoka was a religious fanatic and a genocidal maniac whose only greatness was his missionary zeal.

Let us now finally summarize all that we know of Ashoka:

1. There is very little synchronicity or similarity among the different sources of Ashoka study like Rock Edicts, Ashokavadana, Mahavamsa etc.
2. He was unknown to most Indians for two thousand years until the British revived his study.
3. The Greek records mention his grandfather and his father. But they do not mention Ashoka *even once*.
4. His illustrious father and grandfather, Bindusara and Chandragupta Maurya, who were incidentally quite well-known, conquered and consolidated the entire kingdom and practically gave it on a platter to Ashoka.
5. Ashoka was not the rightful heir to the throne. He killed his older brother and heir-apparent Susima.
6. He also killed his other brothers and male family during a 4-year war of succession.
7. He was a sadist who executed his ministers and women of his harem. He also enjoyed watching innocent people getting tortured to death in his palace of torture "Ashoka's hell."
8. Ashoka was most probably born a Jain or Ajivika, but not a Hindu.
9. Ashoka himself was against Vedic Hindu religion.
10. Ashoka converted to Buddhism much before the Kalinga War.
11. Ashoka's attack on Kalinga and the ensuing blood-bath claimed the lives of lakhs of people. This was his only conquest ever.
12. Subsequent to that Ashoka ordered the genocide of religious minority groups Ajivikas and Jains in eastern India (Bihar and Bengal) for drawing satirical cartoons of Buddha.

13. He created a new cadre of religious police whose job was to spread Buddhism and discourage other religions.
14. Ashoka spent the rest of life propagating Buddhism within his country, sending foreign missions, patronizing the Third Buddhist Council and spending all the States Wealth on Buddhist cause.
15. During his lifetime, there were revolts in his empire and his empire started crumbling.

In the words of Sanjeev Sanyal, *“As one can see, Ashoka does not look like such a great king on closer inspection but as a cruel and unpopular usurper who presided over the disintegration of a large and well-functioning empire.”*[\[138\]](#)

The total Marxist control of post-independence academia has transformed a tyrant and despot into a role-model for modern day secularists and South Asian experts. Ashoka is a mighty weapon used by those who engage in Academic Hinduphobia, and this has been going on for 200 years, and especially in the last 60 years it has achieved a deafening crescendo. When Hinduphobes want to denigrate Hinduism, they deploy the usual “caste, cow, curry” weapon as an internal tool of self-shame and the “Ashoka” as an external weapon to pit the primitive sacrificial Vedic rituals against “rational” and “egalitarian” Buddhism[\[139\]](#).

Ashoka was certainly not a great king. He killed his brothers to ascend the throne. He burnt women in his harem. He tortured people for sadistic pleasure. He presided over a bloody war where lakhs of people died and a river turned red with blood. He committed genocide of a religious minority. He established religious police. He was completely opposed to Vedic rituals and spread Buddhism with a missionary zeal. He implemented extravagant socialist schemes and sponsored Buddhism in a big way. Finally his kingdom ran out of money. He was the inheritor of a magnificent empire which collapsed in front of his very eyes and there was nothing he could do.

“Ashoka the Great” is therefore nothing but a political project. It is a weapon of mass distortion aimed at demeaning Dharma, distorting Hindu views, defaming Sanatana principles, portraying Vedic followers as primitive, backward, superstitious and intolerant.

We need to introspect if this is the Ashoka that we want our children to idolize and emulate.

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auṃ gaṇeśāya namaḥ |
auṃ śrīsūryāya namaḥ |
auṃ durgāyai namaḥ |
auṃ namaḥ śivāya |
auṃ namo nārāyaṇāya |
śrīṃ lakṣmai namaḥ |
traīṃ sarasvatyai namaḥ |
klīṃ kṛṣṇāya namaḥ |
auṃ śrīrādhikāyai namaḥ |
rāṃ rāmāya namaḥ |
auṃ sītāyai namaḥ |
auṃ hanumate namaḥ |

[1] NCERT - National Council of Educational Research and Training is an organisation which assists and advises the central and state governments on academic matters related to school education in India.

Our Past I textbook of history for class 6 is available online. (NCERT, 2014)

The Chapter on Ashoka is available online at <http://www.ncert.nic.in/ncerts/l/fess108.pdf>

[2] CBSE - Central Board of Secondary Education is a Board of Education for public and private schools in India.

[3] CICSE - Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations, is a national level, private Board of School education in India.

[4] (Sanyal, 2015)

[5] Like most average Indians, I used to confuse Atheism with the Indic term Nastika. However, that is an incorrect equivalence. A Nastika is one who does not accept the validity of the Vedas but subscribes to the wider Dharmic world-view of non-exclusivism, like Jains and Buddhists. Islam and Christianity believe in religious exclusivism, hence they cannot be called Nastikas. They used to be known by the derogatory term “Mleccha” or barbarians.

Atheism is a non-Indian and non-Dharmic concept, imported from West to India. By its very definition, an atheist is one who has rejected the Abrahamic notion of exclusivist monotheism.

[6] (Mookerji, 1962, p. 1)

[7] Quoted in (Guruge, 1994, p. 207)

[8] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 206)

[9] (Thapar, 1994, p. 16)

[10] (Sanyal, 2015)

[11] (Guruge, 1994)

[12] In the 1800's, early British historians and archaeologists like James Prinsep, John Hubert Marshall (director-General of Archaeological survey of India), Sir Alexander Cunningham and Mortimer Wheeler, contributed to the discovery, excavation and identification of various sites and structures associated with Ashoka, like Bharhut Stupa, Sarnath, Sanchi, and the Mahabodhi Temple.

[13] List of Major Rock Edicts

- Dhauli, near Bhubaneswar, Orissa (includes Kalinga Edict, excludes Rock Edicts 11-13)
- Girnar, near Junagadh, Gujarat (Ashoka's Major Rock Edict)
- Jaugada, Ganjam district, Orissa (includes Kalinga Edict, excludes Rock Edicts 11-13)
- Kalsi, near Chakrata, Dehradun district, Uttarakhand
- Kandahar, Afghanistan (portions of Rock Edicts 12 and 13; bilingual Greek-Aramaic)
- Mansehra Rock Edicts, Mansehra, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan (in Kharosthi script)
- Sannati, Gulbarga district, Karnataka (separate Rock Edicts 1 and 2, fragments Rock Edicts 13 and 14)
- Shahbazgarhi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (in Kharosthi script)
- Sopara, Thane district, Maharashtra (fragments Rock Edicts 8 and 9)
- Yerragudi, near Gooty, Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh (Major Rock Edicts and Minor Rock Edict)

[14] List of Minor Rock Edicts

- Kandahar, Afghanistan
- Lampaka, Afghanistan
- Bahapur, Delhi
- Bairat, near Jaipur, Rajasthan
- Bhabru, second hill at Bairat, Rajasthan
- Gujarra, near Jhansi, Datia district, Madhya Pradesh
- Rupnath, on the Kaimur Hills near Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh
- Panguraria, Sehore district, Madhya Pradesh
- Sohgaura, Gorakhpur district, Uttar Pradesh

- Sahasram, Rohtas district, Bihar
- Barabar Caves, Bihar
- Mahasthan, Bogra district, Bangladesh
- Rajula-Mandagiri, near [pattikonda], Kurnool district, Andhra Pradesh
- Palkigundu and Gavimath, Koppal district, Karnataka
- Suvarnagiri (Kanakagiri), Koppal district, Karnataka
- Brahmagiri, Chitradurga district, Karnataka
- Jatinga-Rameshwara, near Brahmagiri, Karnataka
- Siddapur, near Brahmagiri, Karnataka
- Maski, Raichur district, Karnataka
- Nittur, Bellary district, Karnataka
- Udegolam, Bellary district, Karnataka

[15] (Mookerji, 1962, p. 19)

[16] (Basham, 1982, p. 132)

[17] “An avadana is a narrative of the religious deeds of an individual and is primarily intended to illustrate the workings of karma and the values of faith and devotion. It can be moralistic in tone but at the same time there is no denying that it has a certain entertainment value.”

John Strong, quoted in (Karlson, *The Constantine and Ashoka of Legend: A Study. IV-2: Comparison Continued*, 2008)

[18] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. xviii)

[19] “Many of these historians found the message on Asokan inscriptions very different from that of most other rulers, suggesting that Asoka was more powerful and industrious, as also more humble than later rulers who adopted grandiose titles.” (NCERT, 2005, p. 34)

[20] Below is a poetic description of the 4 years between Ashoka’s ascension and coronation as described in the Mahavamsa.

Four years after the famous (Asoka) had won for himself the undivided sovereignty he consecrated himself as king in the city Pataliputta. Straightway after his consecration his command spread so far as a yojana (upward) into the air and downward into the (depths of the) earth.’

Day by day did the devas bring eight men's loads of water of (the lake) Anotatta; the king dealt it out to his people. From the Himalaya did the devas bring for cleansing the teeth twigs of naga-creeper, enough for many thousands, healthful fruits, myrobalan and terminalia and mangofruits from the same place, perfect in colour, smell, and taste. The spirits of the air brought garments of five colours, and yellow stuff for napkins, and also celestial drink from the Chaddanta-lake. Out of the naga-kingdom the nagas (brought) stuff, coloured like the jasmine-blossom and without a seam, and celestial lotus-flowers and collyrium and unguents; parrots brought daily from the Chaddanta-lake ninety thousand waggon-loads of rice. Mice converted this rice, unbroken, into grains without husk or powder, and therewith was meal provided for the royal family. Perpetually did honey-bees prepare honey for him, and in the forges bears swung the hammers. Karavika-birds, graceful and sweet of voice, came and made delightful music for the king. And being consecrated king, Asoka raised his youngest brother Tissa, son of his own-mother, to the office of vice-regent. (Geiger, 1912, p. Chapter V)

[21] (Seneviratna, 1994, p. iv)

[22] "The tradition of building artificial caves was an old one. Some of the earliest of these were constructed in the third century BCE on the orders of Asoka for renouncers who belonged to the Ajivika sect." (NCERT, 2005, p. 107)

[23] "Asoka also tried to hold his empire together by propagating dhamma, the principles of which, as we have seen, were simple and virtually universally applicable. This, according to him, would ensure the well-being of people in this world and the next. Special officers, known as the *dhamma mahamatta*, were appointed to spread the message of dhamma." (NCERT, 2005, p. 34)

[24] "According to a Buddhist text known as the Ashokavadana, Asoka distributed portions of the Buddha's relics to every important town and ordered the construction of stupas over them." (NCERT, 2005, p. 96)

[25] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. 140)

[26] “Thus was this council under the protection of king Asoka ended by the thousand bhikkhus in nine months. In the seventeenth year of the king’s reign the wise (thera) who was seventy-two years old, closed the council with a great pavarana-ceremony. And, as if to shout applause to the reestablishment of doctrine, the great earth shook at the close of the council.” (Geiger, 1912, p. Chapter V)

[27] (Dhammika, 1994)

[28] (Basham, 1982, p. 132)

[29] (Mookerji, 1962, p. 2)

[30] (Strong, 1994, p. 143)

[31] (Roy, 2016)

[32] (Strong, 1994, p. 144)

[33] (Dhammika, 1994)

[34] John Strong says: The chronological discrepancies between the dates of Aśoka’s reign (B.E. 218 in the Sri Lankan tradition and B.E. 100 in the North Indian), for example, have plagued historically minded scholars and led some of them to posit two datings for the Buddha’s parinirvāṇa — the commonly accepted 483 (or 486) B.C.E. of the Theravadin era, and the increasingly respected 368 B.C.E. of the North Indian Sarvāstivādin reckoning. (Strong, 1994, p. 144)

[35] Some scholars have taken this to its logical end and concluded that indeed King Devanam Piyadasi of the Rock Edicts is different from Ashoka of the Buddhist tradition. However this is not such an easy task, as essentially the entire edifice of Indian historical reconstruction over the last 200 years is built on two identifications:

- Identification of Sandrocottus of Greek tradition with Chandragupta Maurya
- Identification of Devanam Piyadasi with Ashoka

The dating of Buddha and Mahavira, and almost all subsequent kings are tied to these synchronizations. However it should be noted that even with these synchronizations, reconstruction of Indian history has been riddled with issues like overlapping dynasties, missing kings, missing dynasties,

rejection of traditions, labeling many manuscripts as fabricated and hugely imprecise dates for many people. For example, Kalidasa has been dated between 1st century BCE to 5th century CE, a remarkably imprecise dating.

In order to demonstrate two different personalities, Devanam Piyadasi of the Rock Edicts must be identified with someone else. This is an exercise which would involve complete re-dating of many historic personages and events.

Many scholars have, over the years grappled with this specific question, and what all of them agree is that the identification of Sandrocottus with Chandragupta Maurya is incorrect, and that Sandrocottus of Greek tradition is in fact Chandragupta of the Imperial Guptas. The point where they diverge is the identification of Devanam Piyadasi with a known historic personage.

Dr Raja Ram Mohan Roy has dated Buddha and Mahavira to ~1200 BCE and the Mauryas to ~900 BCE. According to Roy, Ashoka Maurya (~850 BCE) is not Devanam Piyadasi of the Rock Edicts who is identified with Kumaragupta-I (~200 BCE) of the Imperial Guptas.

See (Roy, 2016) for more details.

[36] (Thapar, 1961, p. 10)

[37] (Thapar, 1994)

[38] (Guruge, 1994, pp. 183-184)

[39] (Basham, 1982, pp. 131-132)

[40] (Basham, 1982, pp. 135-136)

[41] Quoted in (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 75)

[42] (Bhandarkar, 1925, p. 7)

[43] (Basham, 1982, p. 135)

[44] (Seneviratna, 1994, p. iv)

[45] (Sanyal, 2015)

[46] (Thapar, 1961, pp. 1-2)

[47] (Thapar, 1961)

- [48] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 60)
- [49] (Lobo, 2011)
- [50] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 37)
- [51] (Wells H. G., 1946, pp. 94-95)
- [52] (Dhammika, 1994)
- [53] (van Buitenen, 1977)
- [54] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 55)
- [55] (Sanyal, 2015)
- [56] (Dhammika, 1994)
- [57] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 80)
- [58] (Basham, 1982, p. 133)
- [59] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 56)
- [60] (Dhammika, 1994)
- [61] (Dhammika, 1994)
- [62] (Topa, 1949, pp. 14-15)
- [63] (Dhammika, 1994)
- [64] (Topa, 1949, pp. 2-3)
- [65] (Strong, 1994, p. 142)
- [66] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 65)
- [67] (Thapar, 1961, p. 3)

[68] While Ashoka had given a great amount of it away to the Sangha, he had not become Anathapindada's equal. When he no longer had access to his own coffers, Ashoka continued to give all that he did have to the Sangha, becoming a virtual pauper even though he was king. At last, he only possessed half of a myrobalan fruit, and even that he gave to the Sangha. The elder of the Sangha was pleased, and cried out in joy about what Ashoka had done: (Karlson, 2008)

*Today this lord of the earth,
his sovereignty stolen by his servants,
presents the gift of just half a myrobalan,
as though reproving the common folk
whose hearts are puffed up
with a passion for enjoying great splendor.*

[69] (Mahavamsa, pp. 11,33-35)

[70] (Guruge A. W., 1994, p. 66)

[71] (Dhammika, 1994)

[72] (Thapar, 1994, p. 20)

[73] **Charlie Hebdo Shooting:** Charlie Hebdo is a strongly secularist, antireligious, and left-wing French satirical weekly newspaper that features cartoons, reports, polemics, and jokes. In January 2015, the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo attacked by Islamic terrorists for publishing cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that angered Muslim leaders in France, the Middle East and other parts of the world. The magazine had for years been receiving threats from Muslim social media users because depictions of the prophet are forbidden in Islam. 11 people were killed and another 11 people were injured over a religious cartoon.

[74] (Sanyal, 2015) “The story suggests frightening parallels with modern-day fundamentalists who kill cartoonists whom they accuse of insulting their religion.”

[75] (Dhammika, 1994)

[76] Rajiv Malhotra defines cultural digestion using the metaphor of a tiger and a deer. (Malhotra, 2012)

I use the metaphors of “tiger” and “deer” to illustrate the process of what I call the “digestion” of one culture by another, carried out under the guise of a desire to assimilate, reduce differences and assert sameness. The key point being made is that the digested culture disappears. This digestion is analogous to the food consumed by a host, in that what is useful gets reformulated into the host’s body,

while that which doesn't quite fit the host's structure is eliminated as waste.

Just as the tiger, a predator, would, the West, a dominant and aggressive culture dismembers the weaker one – the deer – into parts from which it picks and chooses pieces that it wants to appropriate; the appropriated elements get mapped onto the language and social structures of the dominant civilization's own history and paradigms, leaving little if any trace of the links to the source tradition. The civilization that was thus “mined” and consumed gets depleted of its cultural and social capital, because the appropriated elements are then shown to be disconnected from and even in conflict with the source civilization. Finally, the vanquished prey – the deer – enters the proverbial museum as yet another dead creature (i.e. a dead culture), ceasing to pose a threat to the dominant one.

[77] (Dhammika, 1994)

[78] (Elst, 2015)

[79] The Ajivikas were a sect of ascetics in ancient India established by Makkhali Gosala, a contemporary of the Buddha in the 5th century B.C.E. They formed a part of the Nastika school of Indian philosophy.

[80] John Strong in his seminal translation of Ashokavadan describes Ashokás birth as below (Strong J. , 1983):

Now the king's concubines were jealous of her. “This fair, gracious girl,” they thought “is the most beautiful woman in the country; if the king would ever make love to her, he would no longer pay any attention to us!” They instructed her therefore in the barber's art, and soon she became an expert at grooming the hair and beard of the king. Indeed whenever she started to do this, he [would relax so much that he] would quickly fall asleep. The king was very pleased with her and decided to grant her one wish.

“What would you most desire?” he asked.

“That your majesty should have intercourse with me,” she answered.

“But you are a barber girl,” said the king. “I am a monarch, a consecrated ksatriya – how can I have intercourse with you?”

“Your majesty,” she replied, “I am not a barber girl but the daughter of a Brahmin; my father gave me to your highness as a wife!”

Bindusara then declared her as Chief queen and together “they dallied, enjoyed each other, and made love; she became pregnant and, after a period of eight or nine months, gave birth to a son.”

[81] (Karlson, 2008)

[82] In the context of a Royal succession test among Ashok and his brothers, Ashoka initially refuses to participate and explains to his mother: “My body is unpleasant to look at; my skin is rough and the very touch of my body is distasteful to the king.” (Bhattacharya, 2011)

[83] “Subsequently the queen gave birth to a second son, and since he was born *when sorrow had ceased (vigate shoke)*, he was given the name Vitashoka”. (Strong J. , 1983, p. 205)

[84] The date of this incident is not given. However we have conclude that 287 BCE is a reasonable estimate because:

- This incident is supposed to have been the first major event between Ashok’s birth and his coronation. So we have considered the middle point between this two events.
- He was supposed to have been a young prince then.

In 287 BCE, Ashoka would have been 17, which seems a likely age for this event, given the limited evidence that we have.

[85] (Strong J. , 1983, pp. 206-207)

[86] “Yet, as a prince, Ashoka certainly held a great amount of authority within the kingdom. Thus, when one part of the kingdom or another would revolt against the authority of the king, Ashoka would be sent to help take care of the situation. Accordingly, he was able to squash the rebellion peacefully, without having to resort to violence. His brother fared much worse.” (Karlson, 2008)

[87] Quoting traditional Buddhist sources Pradip Bhattacharya narrates (Bhattacharya, 2011):

Some time later, the city of Takshashila rose in rebellion against King Bindusara who dispatched Ashoka to tackle it with a fourfold army of cavalry, elephants, chariots and infantry ... When the citizens of Takshashila heard of Ashoka's approach, they decorated the road for several miles and went to welcome him with vases full of offerings. "O Prince," they said, "we had no intention to revolt against you or the king. But evil ministers oppressed us and the tales of our miseries never reached Pataliputra. Hence, we had to rise and banish the King's evil representatives." In the same manner Ashoka was welcomed into the kingdom of the Khashas where two great warriors entered his service and thenceforth marched ahead of him, cutting a path through the mountains and proclaiming, "Ashoka will become a chakravarti monarch over one of the four continents. None is to oppose him!" Finally, the whole of the northwest, right up to the sea, submitted to him.

[88] According to Pradip Bhattacharya, the rationale behind the ministers siding with Ashoka is given in the following incident: (Bhattacharya, 2011)

Back in the capital, one day Prince Suseema, the eldest son of the king, was returning from a ride when he met the prime minister. In jest, the Prince slapped the venerable man on his bald pate and passed on. But the wise prime minister thought to himself, "Today he slaps me with his hand. When he becomes king, he'll let fall his sword. I must ensure he does not inherit the kingdom." He summoned the five hundred ministers of the king and told them, "It has been predicted by the holy ascetic that Ashoka will become a chakravarti ruling over one of the four continents. When the time comes, let us place him on the throne." And they agreed.

[89] Mahavamsa: "When Bindusāra had fallen sick Asoka left the government of Ujjeni conferred on him by his father, and came to Pupphapura, and when he had made himself master of the city, after his father's death, he caused his eldest brother to be slain and took on himself the sovereignty in the splendid city."

(Geiger, 1912, p. Chapter V)

[90] (Guruge, 1994, p. 192)

[91] “In front of the eastern gate, Radhagupta set up an artificial elephant so cunningly fashioned as to deceive a casual observer. On top of it, he placed an effigy of Ashoka, digging a ditch all around filled with live coals covered with reeds. The whole pit was camouflaged carefully. As Suseema arrived before the city, Radhagupta shouted tauntingly,” If you can slay Ashoka, the throne is yours!” That provoked Suseema to rush to the eastern gate to fight his half-brother. As he charged forward, he fell into the ditch full of live charcoal and died a terrible death.” (Bhattacharya, 2011)

[92] “The consort of prince Sumana, who bore the same name (Sumana), being with child, fled straightway by the east gate and went to a candala village, and there the guardian god of a nigrodha-tree called her by her name, built a hut and gave it to her. And as, that very day, she bore a beautiful boy, she gave to her son the name Nigrodha, enjoying the protection of the guardian god. When the headman of the candālas saw (the mother), he looked on her as his own wife, and kept her seven years with honour.”(Geiger, 1912, p. Chapter V)

[93] Asoka stood high above them all in valour, splendour, might, and wondrous powers. He, when he had slain his ninety-nine brothers born of different mothers, won the undivided sovereignty over all Jambudipa.

(Geiger, 1912, p. Chapter V)

[94] (Mookerji, 1962, pp. 4-5)

[95] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. xxvii)

[96] “Once, Ashoka went strolling in a garden with his women. It was spring and the trees were laden with blooms and fruits.

The king saw an ashoka tree in full bloom, and told his women, “See this is my namesake and how beautiful it is!”

He wanted to be caressed by them, but the women disliked his rough skin and secretly mocked his comparing himself with the lovely tree. So, when he fell asleep, they decided to teach him a lesson. They got together, and removed all the flowers and leaves from the ashoka tree, leaving it bare and unlovely.

On waking, Ashoka's eyes fell on the ashoka tree, transformed from the ecstatic look of spring into the naked forlornness of winter. When he found out from his servants that his concubines were responsible, he was so furious that he had his five hundred women burned alive.”(Bhattacharya, 2011)

[97] Below is the list of torture / punishment a King inflicted on thief's/ criminals in ancient Buddhist South Asia as described in Bala Pandita Sutta (Tan, 2010, p. 183):

having him whipped, caned, clubbed, his hands cut off, his feet cut off, his limbs cut off, his ears cut off, his nose cut off, his ears and nose cut off;

having him subjected to 'the porridge pot,' to 'the polished-shell shave,' to 'Rahus mouth,' to 'the fiery garland,' to 'the flaming hand,' to 'the blades of grass, to the bark dress,'

to (being strapped to the ground by an iron ring around each limb, fastened by iron spikes and then surrounded by fire, called) 'the black antelope'

to [having pieces of his flesh cut and hung on] 'the meat hooks,' to 'the coins' [disc-slice], to 'the lye pickling' [immersion in strong alkaline solution],

to 'the pivoting pin' [where a spike is driven in his skull from ear to ear],

to 'the rolled-up straw mat' (and beaten up); and

having him splashed with boiling oil, and

having him thrown to the dogs to be devoured,

having him impaled alive on stakes, and

having his head cut off with a sword.

[98] “His prime minister noticed that he was out of control. He was not governing the land well. His primary focus was one which should have been secondary: judging people and acting as their executioner when needed. There was much more he should be doing, but he wasn't. The prime minister suggested a solution: Ashoka should create the position of

royal executioner, and let the judgment and punishment be put into that man's hand." (Karlson, 2008)

[99] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. xxviii)

[100] (Thapar, 1961, p. 29)

[101] Girikia based his torture techniques on the Buddhist concept of 5-fold torture in hell as described in Buddhist work Bala Pandita Sutta, and modeled his torture chamber on the Buddhist concept of hell.

10. Now, bhikshus, the hell wardens torture him with the fivefold pinion. They drive a red-hot iron rod through one hand, and then another red-hot iron rod through the other hand. They drive [another] redhot iron rod through one foot, and then another red-hot iron rod through the other foot. They drive (another) red-hot iron rod through his belly. There he feels suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet he does not die so long as the result of that evil action is not exhausted.

11. Next, bhikshus, the hell wardens throw him down and pare him with axes. There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet he does not die so long as the result of that evil action is not exhausted.

12. Next, bhikshus, the hell wardens set him upside down and pare him with adzes. There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet he does not die so long as the result of that evil action is not exhausted.

13. Next, bhikshus, the hell wardens harness him to a chariot and drive him back and forth across fiery, blazing, glowing ground. There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet he does not die so long as the result of that evil action is not exhausted.

14. Next, bhikshus, the hell wardens make him climb up and down a great mound of fiery, blazing, glowing coals. There he suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet he does not die so long as the result of that evil action is not exhausted.

15. Next, bhikshus, the hell wardens seize him upside down and plunge him into a fiery, blazing, glowing metal cauldron. He is cooked there in a swirl of froth. And as he is being cooked there in a swirl of froth, he is swept now up, now down, now across. There he

suffers sharp, piercing, racking pains. Yet he does not die so long as the result of that evil action is not exhausted.

(Tan, 2010, p. 185)

[102] Samudra's realization:

The body is as a foam-bubble, evanescent, worthless.

Where now is that lovely face, that beautiful body?

Only the ignorant delight in this impermanence.

In this prison, I'll cross the ocean of existence.

[103] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. xxix)

[104] The king, in whom kindly feelings had arisen towards that same (Nigrodha), summoned him in all haste into his presence; but he came staidly and calmly thither. And the king said to him: 'Sit, my dear, upon a fitting seat.' Since he saw no other bhikkhu there he approached the royal throne. Then, as he stepped toward the throne, the king thought: 'To-day, this samanera will be lord in my house!' Leaning on the king's hand he (the monk) mounted the throne and took his seat on the royal throne under the white canopy. And seeing him seated there king Asoka rejoiced greatly that he had honoured him according to his rank. When he had refreshed him with hard and soft foods prepared for himself he questioned the samanera concerning the doctrine taught by the Saipbuddha. Then the samanera preached to him the 'Appamadavagga' '.

And when the lord of the earth had heard him he was won to the doctrine of the Conqueror, and he said to (Nigrodha):

'My dear, I bestow on thee eight perpetual supplies of food.' And he answered: 'These will I bestow on my master.'

When again eight (supplies) were bestowed on him he allotted these to his teacher; and when yet eight more were bestowed he gave them to the community of bhikkhus. And when yet again eight were bestowed, he, full of understanding, consented to accept them. Together with thirty-two bhikkhus, he went on the following day, and when he had been served by the king with his own hands, and had preached the doctrine to the ruler, he

confirmed him with many of his train in the refuges and precepts of duty.’(Geiger, 1912, p. Chapter V)

[105] “The problem was that all the relics of the Buddha had been enshrined by Ajaatashatru (Bimbisara’s son who killed his father to become king) and seven other kings of that time in drona stupas. These were so called because each contained one drona (pitcher) of the relics.” (Bhattacharya, 2011)

[106] Below I present verbatim a detailed account of the Naga incident as provided in (Bhattacharya, 2011)

Raamagraama had been washed into the Ganga. Ashoka managed to reach it and was respectfully received by the Nagas who showed him the drona stupa, but refused to part with the relics as they worshipped it. Ashoka, it seems, realized that he would never be able to match the Nagas in their devotion, and this is shown on the bas-reliefs at the Sanchi and Amaravati stupas. Fa-hsien and Hsuan-tsang relate the same story.

According to the Mahaavamsa tradition, the Nagas told Ashoka that these relics had been set aside by the Buddha himself for Dutthagaamani, King of Sri Lanka (circa 101-77 B.C). However, the Sanskrit traditions tell another story. Ashoka, they say, found his way to the eighth stupa barred by a great wheel armed with razor sharp blades spinning in the river.³ He turned to a monk for advice, who told him to throw large quantities of plum into the current, which would jam the machinery. Ashoka did so and got past this obstacle only to be stopped by a huge Naga monarch guarding the relics. Once again, he turned to the monk who stated that only when his merit exceeded that of the Naga would he be able to pass safely. On the monk’s advice, Ashoka had two golden statues made of himself and the Naga King and got them weighed. To his consternation, the Naga’s statue turned out heavier! Yet again, the monk provided the solution: Ashoka must acquire greater merit.

And so, Ashoka went back, performed good work (we are not told what he did) and returned to the weighing only to find that the statues

now were of equal weight. He had, therefore, to acquire more merit until his statue sank down, and the Naga king let him pass.

[107] Ashoka often used to bow down before Buddhist monks. This was not to the liking of his minister Yashas who requested him to refrain from such things.

A few days later, Ashoka called his ministers and told them that he required the heads of different types of animals. Knowing his violent temper (he had executed many ministers in the past) they did not ask him why he wanted these but each of them quickly went about procuring the type of head specified by Ashoka. Yashas was asked to bring a human head.

When all the ministers had obtained the heads, Ashoka asked them to sell these in the market. Soon they had all succeeded except Yashas, who found that none would buy it. He was told, thereupon, to give it away. Yet, none would accept it even free. Yashas came back, crestfallen, to report:

O King, the heads of cattle, asses, deer, birds – all were sold for a price to buyers; but none would take this worthless human head, even free of charge.

Ashoka asked Yashas, “Why is it that no one will accept this human head?”

“Because,” answered Yashas, “it disgusted them.”

Ashoka asked him whether people found this particular head disgusting or all human heads.

Yashas replied, “All human heads they find disgusting.” “What!” exclaimed the king “is my head disgusting too?”

After much hesitation and at the insistence of Ashoka, Yashas finally answered, “Yes.”

Now Ashoka explained to him the intention behind this baffling exercise:

If I acquire some merit by bowing down a head so disgusting that none on earth would take it. What harm is there?(Bhattacharya, 2011)

- [108] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, pp. xxxiii-xxxvi)
- [109] (Thapar, 1961, p. 28)
- [110] (Mookerji, 1962, p. 16)
- [111] (Barua, 1920, p. 69)
- [112] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. xxxvii)
- [113] (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2014)
- [114] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. 140)
- [115] (Dhammika, 1994)
- [116] (Barua, 1920)
- [117] (Bhandarkar, 1925, pp. 1-2)
- [118] (Mukhopadhyaya, 1960, p. xxxviii)
- [119] (Thapar, 1994)
- [120] (Srijan Foundation, 2016)
- [121] In (Sanyal, 2015) Sanjeev Sanyal says:
- Supporters of Ashoka will claim that these acts of genocide are untrue and that they were inserted into the story by fundamentalist Buddhist writers in much later times. This is indeed a possibility but let me remind readers that my alternative narrative is based on exactly the same texts and inscriptions used to praise the emperor. Perhaps the same skepticism should be evenly applied to all the evidence and not just to portions of the text that do not suit the mainstream narrative.
- [122] (Elst, 2015)
- [123] (Thapar, 1994, p. 20)
- [124] (Mookerji, 1962, pp. 5-6)
- [125] (Mookerji, 1962, p. 5)
- [126] (Elst, 2015)
- [127] (Shankar, 2014)

[128] (Hessenlink, 2016)

[129] (Sanyal, 2015)

[130] (Chitta Ranjan, 2007)

[131] (Dhammika, 1994)

[132] (Nehru, 1985, pp. 52,133)

[133] Quoted in (Guruge, 1994, pp. 205-206)

[134] (Vivekananda, 1897)

[135] (SEP, 2010)

[136] (Thapar, 1961)

[137] (Topa, 1949, p. 18)

[138] (Sanyal, 2015)

[139] See (Mehra, 2016) for an excellent analysis on how collective shaming has been used as a tool by “social experts” and certain forces to create a mood of self-disgust and forcing collective self-flagellation among Indians.