



Ashoka in Ancient India

By Nayanjot Lahiri

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In the third century BCE, Ashoka ruled an empire encompassing much of modern-day India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh. During his reign, Buddhism proliferated across the South Asian subcontinent, and future generations of Asians came to see him as the ideal Buddhist king. Disentangling the threads of Ashoka's life from the knot of legend that surrounds it, Nayanjot Lahiri presents a vivid biography of this extraordinary Indian emperor and deepens our understanding of a legacy that extends beyond the bounds of Ashoka's lifetime and dominion.

At the center of Lahiri's account is the complex personality of the Maurya dynasty's third emperor—a strikingly contemplative monarch, at once ambitious and humane, who introduced a unique style of benevolent governance. Ashoka's edicts, carved into rock faces and stone pillars, reveal an eloquent ruler who, unusually for the time, wished to communicate directly with his people. The voice he projected was personal, speaking candidly about the watershed events in his life and expressing his regrets as well as his wishes to his subjects.

Ashoka's humanity is conveyed most powerfully in his tale of the Battle of Kalinga. Against all conventions of statecraft, he depicts his victory as a tragedy rather than a triumph—a shattering experience that led him to embrace the Buddha's teachings. *Ashoka in Ancient India* breathes new life into a towering figure of the ancient world, one who, in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru, “was greater than any king or emperor.”

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Editorial Review

Review

Fascinating. (Chandrabhas Choudhury *Wall Street Journal* 2015-08-20)

Richly thoughtful... The result of all this careful, well-presented thought and research is what is certainly the best biography of Ashoka the Great ever written in English. (Steve Donoghue *Open Letters Monthly* 2015-08-01)

Lahiri has firmly grounded the Ashoka of legend and inscriptions with a novel kind of detail and deliberation, spelling out the connections and implications, combining solid historical analysis with fresh interpretation. (Upinder Singh, University of Delhi)

Where **Lahiri** really scores is in the field of Ashokan archaeology, where she brings together all the work that has been undertaken in the years since 1997... These advances have all been woven seamlessly into Lahiri's narrative, so as to give the clearest chronology yet assembled of the life of Ashoka and what Lahiri calls 'his trajectory as a communicator' and his 'intellectual evolution,' most notably the quite extraordinary change of heart that followed Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga and how this transformed his concept of kingship. (Charles Allen *Literary Review* 2015-09-01)

[**Lahiri's**] idiosyncratic book combines legends, archaeology, and even personal information shrewdly teased out of the edicts to craft an arresting profile. (Brian Bethune *Maclean's* 2015-09-14)

Many biographies have been published on Ashoka, the greatest king of India, but this biography is different, and perhaps the best written on the extraordinary king. (R. N. Sharma *Choice* 2016-01-01)

About the Author

Nayanjot Lahiri is Professor of History at the University of Delhi.

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