Ancient India and China

Biography

Ashoka
c. 302–232 BC

Why He Made History
Ashoka began his rule by expanding his territory through war and brutality. After a change of heart, however, he converted to Buddhism. After that, he largely devoted his efforts to promoting peace. Though he was unknown outside of Sri Lanka until after 1837, he is now considered one of the greatest rulers of ancient India.

As you read the biography below, think about the ways Ashoka found to encourage peace and harmony.

Ashoka, whose name means “I am without sorrow” in Sanskrit, was a son of the emperor Bindusara. As a young man he was a viceroy, or a provincial governor. He became ruler of the Mauryan Empire in about 270 BC. For the first years of his reign, Ashoka adopted a policy of aggression in order to expand his territory.

His rule included the present-day countries of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. After conquering the country of Kalinga, Ashoka became ruler of most of the subcontinent. However, during that conquest, at least 150,000 people were taken prisoner. One hundred thousand others lost their lives.

Reflecting on the casualties of this war, Ashoka began to examine his brutality. He realized that he had caused much suffering. As a result, he decided to make changes in his life. He converted to Buddhism. He then dedicated himself to living a peaceful life and serving his people.

Ashoka worked to spread the Buddhist message in many ways. He had proclamations, or edicts, inscribed on rocks, pillars, and cave walls all across his empire. These inscriptions, which were based on Buddhist ideals, provided his subjects with information about his beliefs. He reportedly also built over 8,000 temples and more than 1,000 tombs (stupas) to honor Buddha. He also built numerous monasteries.

Ashoka’s edicts expressed his policies and communicated his desire for social change. In them he emphasized tolerance for all religions, obedience to parents and elders, respect for religious teachers, and kindness to others. To set an example, Ashoka gave up personal luxuries, stopped hunting, and became a vegetarian. He also toured rural areas of his empire, sharing his message and assisting the needy. Because of Ashoka, Buddhism, which had a very small following, spread throughout India to other countries.

Ashoka also improved the lives of his people. To promote health, he built hospitals and supervised the planting of medicinal herbs. For
travelers, he planted banyan trees along highways to provide shade, and mango trees to provide them with food. He also built roads, had wells dug, and built rest houses by the roadside.

When Ashoka’s grandson took over the kingdom, Ashoka’s goals were abandoned. Still his influence lived on. When his engravings were deciphered in 1837, his mission of tolerance and kindness became better known. In addition, he is remembered for helping to spread Buddhism from a small, localized sect to a major worldwide religion.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?
1. **Recall**  How did Ashoka improve his people’s lives?

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2. **Make Inferences**  Why is the meaning of Ashoka’s name ironic?

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ACTIVITY

Suppose you had the power to spread a message that would encourage peace and harmony and that people of all beliefs could embrace. Write a newspaper editorial in which you outline what your message would be and what steps you would take, personally and publicly, to put it into action. Write your editorial on a separate piece of paper.