

Ashoka – A Retrospective¹

To speak of the king Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty in a retrospective vein is to race through virtually the span of Indian history. The question frequently asked is, why was this extraordinary ruler seemingly ignored in the past centuries and why has he become so prominent in recent times. Subsequent to his reign he is thought to have been gradually set aside. Only in recent times were his inscriptions deciphered, providing evidence of his ideas and actions. Nevertheless, we have to ask whether these were actually ignored through much of Indian history, or whether they were appropriated and if so, by whom, in what form and are we still appropriating them or ignoring them in any essential way ?

Many modern assessments have tended to view him largely as a Buddhist. When placed in a historical context in more recent times the man and his ideas come to be liberated from this single perspective. We need to see him both as a statesman in the context of inheriting and sustaining an empire in a particular historical period, and as a person with a strong commitment to changing society through what might be called the propagation of social ethics.

Empires of the ancient world are often thought to have operated through the violence of conquest and the persuasion of ideology, the latter often intended to bring about a relative cultural uniformity. The method of conquest and the resistance to it varied, requiring subsequent adjustments in systems of governing and in cultural



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