



# Ashoka in Ancient India

*Nayanjot Lahiri*

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## Ashoka in Ancient India Nayanjot Lahiri

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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