A Legacy of Religious Tolerance in India: Ashoka, Akbar, and Conquest by Righteousness

“I have had this edict written so that my sons and grandsons may not consider making new conquests, or that if military conquests are made, that they are done with forbearance...or better still that they consider conquest by righteousness only.”
- King Ashoka, 304 -232 BCE

Throughout its history, the Indian subcontinent has been periodically torn apart by religious tension and conflict. As the birthplace of both Hinduism and Buddhism, a fertile ground for Islam, and home to many other beliefs and sects, South Asia is a living testament to both the potential wonders and horrors of religion. One of the more tragic examples took place at the turn of the 13th century CE, when slave armies commanded by the Sultan Muhammad of Ghor marched on Northern India. Intent on “purging by the sword the land of Hind from the filth of infidelity,” the Sultan’s soldiers took Buddhist India by storm, culminating in the capture of the ancient Buddhist monastery of Nalanda. In a surprise attack, Muslim soldiers torched its centuries-old library and mercilessly murdered its inhabitants, as “smoke from burning manuscripts hung for days like a dark pall over the low hills.” Over the course of the Ghurid wars, thousands of “infidel” temples were obliterated and their rubble hastily converted into new mosques, and for almost a millennium India’s illustrious Buddhist past was all but forgotten.

By 1765, when Britain’s East India Trading Company held undisputed control over the crumbling Mughal Empire, India’s Buddhist legacy lay largely forgotten. “Blasphemous” inscriptions had been erased from ancient masonry and pillars engraved with Buddhist texts had been turned into dam foundations. Half a century later, the Charter Act of 1813 was passed, sealing British sovereignty over India. As a consequence, still more of India’s Buddhist history was lost to the shadows. As Christian missionaries poured into the subcontinent to eradicate “dark and bloody superstition,” politicians in the House of Commons belittled traditional culture, insisting that “a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” Operating from a nondescript London office, the East India Trading Company amassed more Mughal-era artifacts in a single Welsh castle than Delhi’s National Museum, further diminishing modern India’s grasp of its own religious and cultural heritage. However, the East India Trading Company’s cultural theft had an unintended effect: in time, it brought an earlier period in India’s history back into focus.
Intrigued by mysterious engravings they found on stone pillars from India to Afghanistan, Britain’s Orientalist scholars sought and struggled to reconstruct a long-buried past. Poring over manuscripts discovered in sites from Sri Lanka to China, in ancient languages forgotten by all but a select few monks, they converted age-old Asian myths into historical facts. Along the way, these scholars unearthed and painstakingly recreated the kingdoms of Ashoka and Akbar I. In doing so, they uncovered two remarkably tolerant chapters in the subcontinent’s long and often violent history.

**Ashoka: Conquest by Righteousness**

With soaring school dropout rates, low literacy levels, and crippling corruption, modern Bihar is one of India’s poorest states. Yet more than two millennia ago, its capital, Patna, situated on the southern bank of the Ganges, was the birthplace of the mighty Mauryan kings. The reign of King Bindusara from 298-272 BCE brought nearly the whole subcontinent under Mauryan rule, with the Kalinga region on the eastern coast of the subcontinent one of the only areas left unconquered.

However, unlike his father, the powerful king Bindusara, the young prince Ashoka did not appear destined for greatness. Universally described as “ugly” with an inexplicable “falling sickness,” he was relegated to the bottom of the princely pecking order. Nonetheless, undeterred and astute, Ashoka made powerful court allies and ascended through the ranks so fast that even the King himself felt threatened. He hurriedly sent the teenage prince to quash a rebellion far away, where he would be less of a risk. Several years later, when his father lay dying, Ashoka returned to the capital. Dressed in royal finery and poised to seize power, his appearance prompted the king’s fatal bout of “apoplectic rage.” With the King dead, Ashoka slaughtered his rival heirs, taking the throne in 272 BCE.

For the next twelve years, Ashoka waged almost continuous war, earning himself a terrifying reputation as “Chanda Ashoka” – “Ashoka the Fierce.” Early on, he sought to solidify power. Dissenters were silenced, critics murdered, and hundreds sent to an elaborate torture chamber known as “Ashoka’s hell.” Then, in 260 BCE, he conquered the Kalinga region. As he surveyed the bloody battlefield where his troops had secured his reign across all of India, he felt not elation but disgust. Seeing the Daya River red with the blood of 100,000 fallen soldiers, he vowed to renounce violence and embrace Buddhism.
Although the exact historical details remain hazy, scholars agree that Ashoka became an enthusiastic proponent of his newfound Buddhist beliefs and slowly reformed the religious foundations of his empire. Not content with personal conversion, he sent missionaries throughout the world and, due to his close friendship with the Sri Lankan King Devanampiyatissa, succeeded in converting him too. Subsequently, he dedicated his vast wealth to building tens of thousands of Buddhist temples, importing medicinal plants, and digging wells to benefit those in his kingdom.¹³

Far more than for his wider reform efforts, however, Ashoka is remembered today for his personal efforts to create a better and more tolerant world for his subjects. Chiseled onto hundreds of sandstone pillars that can still be found from Allahabad to Kandahar, his edicts appear more like a human rights convention than diktats of an emperor. Ashoka’s pillars read, “Piyadasi” – beloved of the Gods.¹⁴ “The king is like a father…My only intention is that [you] live without fear of me…that I may give [you] happiness.”¹⁵ Ashoka’s pillar-borne messages sought to instill religious freedom and tolerance, insisting that “[a]ll religions should reside everywhere, for all of them desire self-control and purity of heart.” “There should be growth in the essentials of all religions,” he continued, “restraint in speech, that is, not praising one’s own religion, or condemning the religion of another without just cause. And if there is need for criticism it should be done in a mild way.”¹⁶

“For he who does reverence to his own sect while disparaging the sects of others,” Ashoka argued, “in reality, inflicts the severest of injury on his own sect.” He also lamented that “for many hundreds of years, killing or harming living beings…and improper behavior towards Brahmans and ascetics has increased,” but promised, “now…the sound of the [war] drum has been replaced by the sound of the Dhamma (righteousness).”¹⁷ Only too aware that it is “easy to do much evil,” Ashoka confessed that the Kalinga massacre caused him “profound sorrow and regret”: “[I] am deeply pained by the killing, dying and deportation that take place when an unconquered country is conquered…[I] feel deep remorse.” Anxious to receive forgiveness himself, Ashoka argued that “even those who do wrong should be forgiven, if forgiveness is possible,” and demanded “uniformity in law and uniformity in sentencing.”¹⁸

Reportedly donating 100,000 pieces of gold to the 84,000 temples he constructed, Ashoka was ultimately bankrupted by his own generosity.¹⁹ The Mauryan Empire collapsed shortly after Ashoka died in 232 BC, his reign wrenched apart by power struggles. While little more than dusty sketches of long-destroyed statues survive to attest to Ashoka’s reign, his philosophy remains.

Writing to his daughter from a prison cell, Indian independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru described Ashoka as a source of inspiration for non-violent struggles and later set the Buddhist “wheel of law”
symbol in the center of India’s tricolor flag.

Throughout Thailand, Cambodia, and China, kings and statesmen alike have endeavored to follow his example.

**Akbar I: India’s Philosopher King**

“To me it seems that in the pursuit of virtue, the idea of death should not be thought of; one should practice virtue simply because it is good.”

- Akbar I, 1542-1645

With the assassination of one of Ashoka’s successors, the sun finally set on the Mauryan Empire. Subsequently, the Sungas seized power for some time, but were eventually replaced by Indo-Greek kings. After the passing of Mauryan rule, empires rose and fell for over a millennium on the subcontinent. In 1556 CE, however, a 13-year-old boy who would come to be known as Akbar the Great assumed the throne of the Mughal Empire. With “bright flashing eyes,” a legendary military prowess, and a distinctly strong personality, "one could easily recognize even at first glance he was King.

At a time when havoc pervaded Europe due to the Protestant Reformation, Akbar I’s empire rested stably on a foundation of religious freedom, with Akbar personally chairing discussions between different religious groups. In an example indicative of the depth of respect for religious difference, Akbar, a Muslim, became a vegetarian due to the influence of Jain teachers. Although Akbar ultimately remained a devout Muslim, he became convinced of broad similarities between major religions and attempted to fuse them into a single *din-e-Ilahi* (religion of God).

“Too many people do not investigate their religious arguments and instead blindly follow the religion in which [they] were born and educated,” he said, “thus excluding [themselves] from the possibility of ascertaining the truth, which is the noblest aim of the human intellect.”

Although never able to read or write himself, Akbar was educated by Persian scholars, amassed tens of thousands of volumes in a myriad of languages and invited men of every spiritual persuasion, from atheist to Zoroastrian, to debate in his court. “The pursuit of reason,” he believed, was superior to blind "reliance on the marshy land of tradition”; this conviction would strongly influence his judicial decision-making.
Akbar’s thoughtfulness did not remain limited to religious teachings. Although child marriage had been an acceptable practice in Mughal India, Akbar argued against it. He posited that “the object intended” in marriage “is still remote, and there is the immediate possibility of injury.” He questioned, too, the smaller fraction of property granted to women under Islamic inheritance laws: “owing to a (daughter’s) weakness,” he insisted, “she deserves to be given a larger share.” In 1582 CE he even ordered the release of all imperial slaves, considering it beyond “the realm of justice and good conduct to benefit from force.”

Under Akbar’s command, the jizya tax on non-Muslims was abolished, conversions were permitted, and adherents of all religions were granted freedom to build and repair their places of worship. When his perplexed son asked why he allowed Hindu ministers to spend money building a temple, Akbar answered, "My son, I love my own religion...[but] the Hindu [minister] also loves his religion. If he wants to spend money on his religion, what right do I have to prevent him...Does he not have the right to love the thing that is his very own?" Determined to find the most talented musicians to grace his court, he appointed Hindus alongside Muslims, even controversially choosing a defeated Hindu king to command his army. This intermingling of India’s cultural-religious traditions also found expression in the syncretic architecture of Akbar’s personal capital of Fatehpur Sikri, which combined traditional Indian structures with Islamic finishing and details.

His outspoken tolerance earned Akbar powerful enemies. Eventually, even his eldest son Salim joined orthodox Muslims in opposition against him. Shortly after Akbar’s death from dysentery in 1605 CE, his tolerant empire began to crumble, with many of religious concessions revoked by his great-grandson Aurangzeb. Over time, temples toppled, religious fault lines split open, and chaos ensued, playing right into the hands of British colonialists who implemented their “divide and conquer” strategy.

**Divide and Fall: Unite and Flourish**

“Hindoos and Musulmans are natural enemies, the same with Sikhs, yet the result of mixing them in one corps has been to make them join against the (British) Government…Our endeavor should be to uphold
in full force the (fortunate for us) separation which exists between the different religions and races, and not endeavor to amalgamate them. Divide et impere should be the principle of Indian Government.”
- Brigadier John Coke, East India Trading Company

With India paralyzed by religious and political conflict, British officers enslaved, exploited, and plundered with impunity. India's history textbooks often “read like the account of a horrible dream - a nightmare through which India has passed,” describing a nation rocked by bouts of iconoclasm, post-independence massacres, and the rise of religious fanaticism. Yet Nobel Prize-winning Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore decried this viewpoint as a “foreigners' history” which eclipsed “the ways and means of allowing people with dissimilar convictions to live peacefully together rather than going for each other's jugular.”

With 780 languages, 29 states, and eight major religions, India remains one of the world’s most diverse nations. “Accents vary between one neighborhood and another... men wear clothes which conform to the style of the 13th century or reflect the latest Esquire,” reminisced Amartya Sen, a contemporary economist. Sen continued: “Teenagers do the twist or drink Coke while the devout Brahmin takes a dip in the Ganges and chants his mantras to the rising sun.”

Although India is often considered a staunchly Hindu state, critics argue this is an oversimplification. Despite the bloody post-independence massacres of 1948, many Indians resolutely ignored the call for an “exchange of people”, and a third of Indian Muslims opted to remain in a Hindu-majority India. Today, there are almost as many Muslims in India as in Pakistan. Buddhism flourished in India for over a millennium following the tireless travels of Siddhārtha Gautama across the subcontinent, and the country has provided safe haven for persecuted Jains, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians. Today, India is home to the world’s largest population of Baha’is, as well as over one million Ahmadi Muslims, both populations persecuted in neighboring countries.

Even as the majority faith, Hinduism grants its adherents ample space for discussion, with doubt and questioning actively encouraged. In the sacred Ramayana poem depicting the virtuous life of the Hindu hero and deity Rama, the protagonist’s former teacher and critic Javali is given free rein to denounce hallowed Hindu practices. “There is no after-world, nor any religious practice for attaining that,” he argues defiantly. “[Such practices] have been laid down in the [scripts] by clever people just to rule over [other] people.”

Rejected by societies across the Western world for centuries, atheistic ideas were aired freely in medieval India, although their significance is often overshadowed today by the country’s “impressive religiosity.” Well known as the language of mystics and monks, Sanskrit boasts not only the largest body of religious texts in a classical language but also the greatest number of volumes devoted to atheism and agnosticism. While Christians of the wrong persuasion burned at the stake in England and France, 14th-century Hindu scholar Madhava Acarya published, without recrimination, his “Collection of all Philosophies”, opening with a defense of atheism. “There is no heaven,” he stated boldly, “no final liberation, nor any soul.”

India’s interpretation of religious tolerance is unique. It does not infringe on the secular state. To ensure neutrality, the state remains “equidistant” from all different faiths, including agnosticism and atheism, ensuring “members of different faiths are treated symmetrically.”
Despite a history rich in periods of religious tolerance, as epitomized by the reigns of Ashoka and Akbar I, India’s peaceful religious coexistence may again be under threat. Having won just two parliamentary seats in 1984, the controversial Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has experienced a “meteoric rise” over recent decades. In the 2014 elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party secured an outright majority. Today, many Indians fear the party’s creeping influence, particularly due to Modi’s controversial role in fatal religious riots that occurred in Gujarat in 2002. Since the party’s rise, school history textbooks have been surreptitiously rewritten with “indifferent scholarship” and “distorted ideology,” while questionable “mass conversions” to Hinduism have become so prevalent that national legislation against forced conversion is under discussion.

While for the moment, “religious fundamentalism still has a relatively small following in India,” Amartya Sen warns that “various factions seem to be doing their best to increase the numbers.” As India battles the rising tide of nationalism, the “remarkable moral and humanitarian legacy” of Ashoka and Akbar the Great offer a rich heritage of tolerance as an alternative.

Learn More

Books


Articles
3 Allen, 3-5.
4 Allen, 1.
8 Allen, 1.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Allen, 1.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Allen, 1.
20 Ibid.
24 Sen, 25.
26 Ibid.
27 Sen, 25.
28 Ibid.
29 Considine, 4.
30 Sen, 25.
32 Ibid.
34 Sen, 25.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.

Image links (in order of appearance)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Portrait_of_East_India_Company_official.jpg (East India Company official with attendants)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3d/Maurya_Dynasty_in_265_BCE.jpg (extent of the Mauryan Empire in the reign of Ashoka)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/AsokaKandahar.jpg (Edict of Ashoka found in Kandahar, Afghanistan)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d1/Jesuits_at_Akbar%27s_court.jpg (Akbar oversees a religious debate at the Idabat Khana in his capital, Fatehpur Sikri)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b3/Aurangzeb-portrait.jpg (Aurangzeb, 6th Mughal Emperor and great-grandson of Akbar, under who reinstated orthodox Islam and increased religious persecution. The long decline of the Mughal Empire dates from his death in 1707)
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/1/17/Ashoka_Chakra.svg/2000px-Ashoka_Chakra.svg.png (the Ashokachakra, as represented in the flag of India)