

India's Conservationist Emperor

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

Photographs by Smithsonian Institution, from "Early Indian Sculpture" by Ludwig Bachhofer.

Courtesy Harcourt, Brace and Company

THE READER of history travels, for the most part, through a dreary, desolate land, watered by blood more often than by gentle rains from heaven. Only here and there in the midst of vast moral deserts does the traveler thirsting for spiritual refreshment come upon a green oasis or a fertile valley, where fancy loves to linger. One of these peaceful oases amidst history's arid sands is provided by the reign of Asoka Maurya, who ruled over most of India in the third century before Christ.

Asoka was the third sovereign of the Maurya dynasty, whose name was taken from the peacocks (mors) that dwell in the Indian forests. His ancestors appear to have been petty chieftans of a tribe established under the shadow of the mighty snow-peaks of the Himalayas. When Asoka's great-grandfather, head of the Maurya clan, was slain in battle, his wife Mura fled to her parents, who lived disguised as peacock-tamers along the banks of the Ganges. Here her child was born; but seeing for her infant boy no prospect happier than an exile's hard life, Mura carried him back to his father's hills amidst the snow-peaks. All garlanded with flowers like an offering to the gods, the babe was abandoned in a disused cattle trough. But the little waif happened to be found by shepherds, who called him Chandra after the moon, and with whom he grew up among the rhododendron-clad hills.

Later, inspired apparently by the astute Chanakya, who afterward became his chief minister and wrote a book on the government of empires, the youth fought his way back to power. Eventually he seized the throne of Magadha in the Ganges valley, then the premier state of India, and, as Chandragupta, became India's first historic emperor. Thus he was in a position to confront the Greeks, whom, in 327 B.C., Alexander of Macedonia had led into the valley of the Indus. So successful was Chandragupta as a warrior, so terrible were his great battalions of fighters mounted upon elephants, that he not only drove Alexander's successors beyond the confines of India proper, but, through a treaty with Seleukos Nikator, he obtained possession of much of the lands that are today included in Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and Makran. He was ap-



Lion carvings on the capital of one of the columns on which the Indian Emperor Asoka had carved edicts, some of which stand among the earliest conservation rulings.

parently a harsh, despotic ruler; and it has been said that he freed the Indians of the Macedonians only to subject them to a less tolerable domestic tyranny.

Following an ancient Indian custom, Chandragupta, after ruling 24 years, relinquished the throne to his son Bindusara, and retired to pass his old age in religious meditation. Of Bindusara's reign, which lasted for about 28 years, history tells us little. In about 273 B.C. he was succeeded by his more illustrious son, Asoka-var dhana, who was then about thirty years of age, and had already enjoyed considerable administrative experience as viceroy, first of Taxila on the northwestern frontier, and later of Ujjain. After ruling about twelve years, Asoka undertook to round out his possessions by the conquest of Kalinga, a region lying along the western side of the Bay of Bengal. When, after a bloody war, he subdued this territory, his dominions included all the Deccan except the southern third, the valleys of the Ganges and the Indus, and the extensive areas in Afghanistan and Baluchistan, which had been ceded by Seleukos Nikator to his grandfather. Thus on the east and south the boundaries of his realm fell somewhat short of those of the recent British Empire of India, but they far exceeded them on the northwest; and he ruled a vaster kingdom.

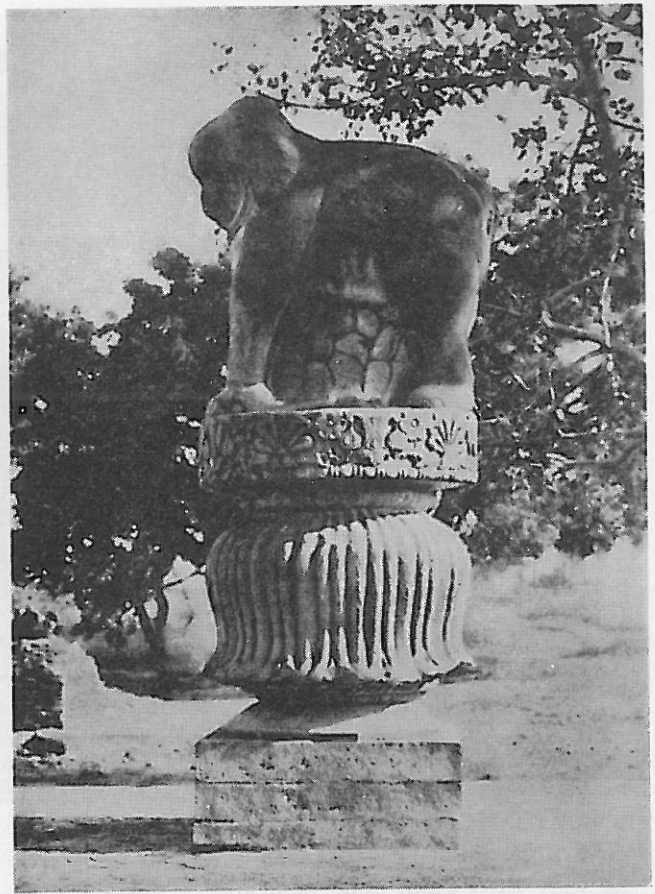
In his youth, Asoka appears to have been much like any other raja of the period, living in luxury and taking



Another lion motif on a capital crown. Asoka's edicts were carved on great columns of polished limestone.

delight in the chase. But during or directly after the conquest of Kalinga, he responded to the influence of Buddha's teachings. It is difficult to trace, through the mists of so many centuries, the stages in his spiritual awakening and growth; but by his own admission his experiences during the bloody conflict brought about a complete change in moral values and opened his heart to the benevolent doctrines of Gautama Buddha, who had lived and taught in Magadha two or three centuries earlier. At the conclusion of the Kalinga war, the Emperor became a Buddhist lay disciple, and after a novitiate of about two and a half years entered the Buddhist Order as a monk, although he continued with great energy and efficiency to administer the affairs of his vast domains. Such a combination of monkish devotion with regal duties is by no means unique in the annals of ancient India and China.

India is notoriously poor in historical documents. Her writers deemed it of more importance to preserve their thoughts on philosophic and religious subjects than to record the endless quarrels that form so large a share of the history of Europe. During the Maurya dynasty, there was an exchange of envoys between the Indian monarchs and the Hellenic rulers, who had divided the territories subjugated by Alexander the Great; and fortunately some of these Greek visitors to India left accounts of what they saw and did. Centuries later, Buddhist pilgrims from China, visiting the holy places



A plump elephant formed the motif that crowned the capital of another of the many Asoka edict columns.

of their religion in India, collected and recorded the still extant traditions of the great Buddhist ruler. And naturally many legends, of doubtful historic value, grew up around the memory of so important a figure. But the chief source of our information about Asoka is the inscriptions which, with an eye to remote generations, he ordered to be carved over the length and breadth of his immense empire. In the districts closer to his capital, Pataliputra (modern Patna) on the Ganges, the inscriptions were incised on pillars — great monolithic columns of finely polished sandstone, surmounted by ornate capitals that often bore lions or other figures that rank among the finest examples of animal sculpture the world has known, the whole monument being forty or fifty feet high. In more distant portions of the realm, the royal edicts were carved on the faces of cliffs or huge boulders. One who cuts his words into hard rock can not afford to waste them; and in the following account I shall, to a considerable extent, allow the Emperor to tell his own story. The quotations from the edicts are from the English translations given by Vincent A. Smith in the third edition of his book *Asoka*, published in 1920 by the Clarendon Press.

In her short sketch, *Asoka, Emperor of India*, Hilda Seligman states emphatically that after his conversion to Buddhism Asoka disbanded his armies and, amidst all the war and turmoil of the third century B.C.,

Some of the royal edicts of Asoka were carved on rocks, with animal carvings, such as this elephant of Dhauili.



maintained his rule by moral force alone — an experiment that more than two millenia later no government has the courage to make. Smith limits himself to stating that, although the Wardens of the Marches may or may not have been compelled to defend with arms the far-flung frontiers, Asoka never again waged a war of aggression. The Fourth Rock Edict declares that the reverberation of the war drums has become the reverberation of the Law; but the army is not specifically mentioned in the available inscriptions. There can be no doubt, however, that the Emperor was remorseful of the cruelties inflicted by his early conquest, for in his Thirteenth Rock Edict he declared "that of all the people who were then slain, done to death, or carried away captive in Kalinga, if the hundredth part or the thousandth part were now to suffer the same fate, it would be a matter of regret to His Sacred Majesty." Then follows a sentence that reveals the grandeur of the man's soul: "Moreover, should any one do him wrong, that too must be borne with by His Sacred Majesty, so far as it can possibly be borne with." It is evident that he has come a long way from the "off with his head" attitude of the Oriental despot.

Asoka's chief concern was for the spread and devoted practice of the *Dharma*, or Buddhist Law of Piety, which he himself summarized in Minor Rock Edict II: "Thus saith His Sacred Majesty: — 'Father and mother must be hearkened to; similarly, respect for living creatures must be firmly established; truth must be spoken. . . . Similarly, the teacher must be revered by the pupil, and fitting courtesy must be shown to relations. This is the ancient nature of things — this leads to length of days, and according to this men must act.' "

It is the second of these points emphasized by the Emperor — respect for living creatures — that is of greatest immediate interest to naturalists and conservationists. In pursuance of this policy, Asoka abolished the royal hunt, to which he had been addicted in his youth, and substituted for it periodical "tours of piety." The most famous of these devout pilgrimages took him to the site of Gautama Buddha's birth at Rummindei in Nepal, where he caused a carved pillar to be erected commemorating the royal visit. He also abolished the slaughter of animals for the imperial household, as he

tells in his First Rock Edict: "Formerly, in the kitchen of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King each day many hundred thousands of living creatures were slaughtered to make curries. But now, when this scripture of the Law is being written, only three living creatures are slaughtered for curry [daily], to wit, two peacocks and one antelope — the antelope, however, not invariably. Even those three living creatures shall not be slaughtered in future."

Apparently, the "hundred thousands" of creatures were slaughtered to feed the army, and perhaps also the populace, in the Emperor's unregenerate days. Animal sacrifices to the gods were also prohibited throughout the realm. The Emperor was most insistent on this point, and the carved edicts often repeat the decree. "Merry-makings" accompanied by animal-fights, heavy drinking, and feasting on meat were forbidden, although theatrical performances and more decorous gatherings were commended.

One of the most interesting of the inscriptions, Pillar Edict V, concerns the conservation of wildlife and natural resources. The following creatures were declared exempt from slaughter — parrots, starlings, "Brahmany ducks," geese, bats, queen-ants, female tortoises, "boneless fish," river tortoises, porcupines, tree squirrels, stags, "Brahmany bulls," (?) monkeys, rhinoceros, gray doves, village pigeons, and all four-footed animals which are neither utilized nor eaten. The list includes a few others that the antiquarians can not with certainty identify. What government has ever published a more varied list of protected species? Doubtless the Emperor would have liked to go even further than this and prohibit all killing, but he was aware that it is a dangerous policy for even a powerful monarch to attempt to effect too radical a change in his people's habits in the course of a few years. Many of these animals not

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granted full protection were given the benefit of closed seasons. The same edict specifies certain days on which fish could not be caught or sold — days which, according to Smith's calculations, amounted to 56 in the year. On these same days, in elephant-forests and fish-ponds, the destruction of all animals of whatever class was also prohibited.

This same comprehensive edict declares that forests must not be set on fire, either wantonly or for the destruction of life. This decree was apparently intended to abolish the widespread custom of driving the forest animals into the open for slaughter. The chaff from the threshing floors was not to be burned, because this would destroy the living things in it — and at the same time, we may add, waste organic matter that should be returned to the soil. Another stipulation of this royal decree was that the living must not be fed with the living. The branding of horses and oxen, the castration of bulls, rams, goats, boars, and other animals, was prohibited on a number of specified days. The Emperor evidently disapproved of these practices yet believed it unwise to prohibit them entirely. But the caponing of cocks, less necessary for farm management, was totally forbidden.

Asoka by no means limited to prohibitions his efforts to bring happiness to all the living things within his immense realm. In his Seventh Pillar Edict, His Majesty declared: "On the roads, too, I have had banyan-trees planted to give shade to man and beast; groves of mango-trees I have had planted; at every half-kos I have had wells dug; rest-houses, too, have been erected; and numerous watering-places have been provided by me here and there for the enjoyment of man and beast." And in the Second Rock Edict, the Emperor told of his "healing arrangements [hospitals] for men and healing arrangements for beasts." Medicinal herbs for both men and beasts, wherever lacking, were both imported and planted. Roots and fruits were likewise imported and planted wherever necessary.

For the enforcement, over about two million square miles of territory, of these laws directed toward "the growth of piety among men and the more complete abstention from killing animate beings and from the sacrificial slaughter of living creatures," Asoka appointed many High Officers of the Law of Piety. These officials, whose duties comprised those of ancient Roman censors along with those of modern game wardens, were charged among other things with the distribution of alms, vigilance in matters affecting the church and the welfare of Brahmans and ascetics, and the interests of householders. By

these measures the Emperor hoped, to use his own words, to foment practices "whereby compassion, liberality, truth, purity, gentleness, and saintliness will . . . grow among mankind."

There was something wholly modern, almost Yankee, in Asoka's insistence, often reiterated in the inscriptions, that small and great should exert themselves, as, according to his own admission indelibly engraved in the hard rock, he himself had exerted himself strenuously. For him, as more than twenty centuries later for his compatriot Gandhi, religion was not mere passive contemplation, but active endeavor to improve the lot, not only of mankind, but of all animate creatures. That he, indeed, strenuously exerted himself there is abundant evidence. He found Buddhism a small local sect, and by sending missionaries far and wide, even to distant Cyrene in northern Africa, laid the foundations for its growth as a world religion. He was so eager to advance the welfare of his people that he issued a proclamation stating that he would at all hours be accessible for the transaction of the public business. How clearly he reveals himself as he speaks to us across the centuries with these words chiselled in the rock at his command: "So by me the arrangement has been made that at all times, when I am eating, or in the ladies' apartments, or in my private room, or in the stables and cowsheds, or in my (?) conveyance, or in the pleasure-grounds, everywhere the persons appointed to give information should keep me informed about the affairs of the people" For a conscientious man, ruling an empire can be a strenuous business, allowing little repose and scant privacy. Asoka died in 232 B.C., after reigning 41 years.

Zeal for a cause so intense as Asoka displayed is all too likely to lead to a narrow and intolerant fanaticism, yet happily he avoided this blemish. "I devote my attention," he declared in the Sixth Pillar Edict, "to all communities, because all denominations are revered by me with various forms of reverence. Nevertheless, personal adherence to one's own creed is the chief thing, in my opinion." And again in the Twelfth Rock Edict: "The sects of other people all deserve reverence for one reason or another. By thus acting, a man exalts his own sect, and at the same time does service to the sects of other people. By acting contrariwise a man hurts his own sect, and does disservice to the sects of other people."

The foregoing quotations from the edicts make it plain that the motive behind Asoka's conservation policy was wholly distinct from that which inspires most of our own. In general, twentieth century conservation measures are undertaken, not for the sake of the things conserved, but to safeguard our own interests, economic or otherwise. We protect the forests not out of consideration for the animals that dwell in them, but to preserve our sources of lumber. We spend millions to increase the propagation of waterfowl

and other animals, not for the welfare of these creatures themselves, but in order to have something living to shoot. So far as the available records give evidence, Asoka was not influenced by economic considerations; he preserved the creatures of his dominions for their own sake, not for subsequent exploitation by mankind. He made it abundantly clear that he reigned to give happiness to both man and beast.

Whatever the motives inspiring conservation may be, the results are to a certain extent the same. If we preserve the forests to protect watersheds and ensure a continuing supply of lumber, free creatures will find refuge in them; if we prevent fires so as not to destroy the animals that dwell in the woodland, we incidentally conserve watersheds and save trees for lumber. To guard natural societies of animals and plants as sources of future wealth is enlightened self-interest, without which our descendants may disappear from the earth. Such a policy insures the continued existence of men as economic units. But Asoka's kind of conservation reveals a more enlightened interest, for it was founded upon a philosophy that viewed men and other creatures as something more than economic units, whose welfare was not to be measured in terms of wealth and survival alone. Clearly we can learn much from the teachings of this king who reigned so far away and long ago, both in our dealing with our fellow men and our treatment of other forms of life.

Editors Note: The following quotations from Buddha, as compiled by E. M. Bowden for his *The Essence of Buddhism*, have been called to our attention by W. L. McAtee, with the suggestion that there might be an appropriate corner in *Nature Magazine* for them. It would seem that here, immediately following Dr. Skutch's splendid article, would be the appropriate corner. We quote from Buddha, from whom Emperor Asoka drew inspiration, as follows:

"Ofttimes while he mused—the squirrel leaped
Upon his knee, the timid quail led forth
Her brood between his feet, and blue doves pecked
The rice-grains from the bowl beside his hand."
"He cherished the feeling of affection for all beings as if they were his only son."
"Filled with compassion for all creatures"
"Every variety of living creature I must ever defend from harm"
"Whoso hurts not living creatures, whether those that tremble or those that are strong, nor yet kills or causes to be killed, him do I call a good man."
"Whosoever . . . harms living beings. . . and in whom there is no compassion for them, let us know such as base-born."
"All beings desire happiness; therefore to all extend your benevolence."
"Loving all things that live even as themselves."
"Be kind to all that lives."