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Chapters 1-5 (= *Khilnani - 1)

THE BUDDHA

Waking India Up

Fifth century BCE

The sun has slipped behind the tarpaulin roofs of a Mumbai slum. Day laborers are streaming home from ten-hour shifts working on construction sites or tending the gardens of nearby private schools. In this particular web of slum lanes, many workers are Dalit, the untouchables of old—a status so low they were not even part of the caste order. Most months, their financial situation boils down to what people around here call “earn and eat.” But for two years, some of these families set aside what little they could for bricks and mortar, and now they have a deep-blue room, five meters a side, that stands distinct from all the other hand-built homes in the slum.

A temple devoted to the Buddha—many slums in urban India have one. This particular place of worship is tucked behind a scrap shop. In the West, the Buddha is often seen as an extinguisher of his own personality, the original Impersonal Man. Indeed, after attaining his enlightenment, it is said that he referred to himself as *tathagata*, “gone.” In modern India, though, his legacy has helped hundreds of millions of low-caste citizens become newly present, allowing them to emerge from the Hindu caste system’s iron cage. He is far more surprising, it turns out, than the conventional image—or the one of a placid sage sitting in the lotus position, half smiling—lets on. Although many aspects of the Buddha’s life remain elusive, he is perhaps the first individual personality we can recognize in the subcontinent’s history.

Fifteen-year-old Vijay watched his father lay bricks for the little blue

temple. "Buddha had no caste, so I have no caste," he says. "It's better this way." His older brother Siddhartha chimes in: "Buddha was for *equality*."

Siddhartha is one of a dozen boys in the slum who were named after the Buddha, a man born Siddhartha Gautama near the foothills of Nepal's southern border with India, probably in the fifth century BCE. In his lifetime, the Buddha created a spiritual philosophy that has rightly been called one of the turning points in the history of civilization. Less known, but perhaps equally important, were his rational challenges to reigning beliefs about caste and religious authority. Some scholars see him as a social subversive, some as a wary critic of self-important merchants, priests, and kings. To others, he was primarily a philosophical, and even political, experimentalist, one who explored new ways of organizing and conducting human life.

The religion that began with his experiments eventually spread throughout Asia, from the western edges of Afghanistan to Japan, gradually becoming what it is now: the fourth largest in the world. But in India it flourished for a millennium, and then all but disappeared, for reasons that are still mysterious. Only in the mid-twentieth century, as British colonial rule gave way to an independent India, was the Indian Buddha revived in the place of his birth, dusted off and reclaimed for his political utility as much as for his ethics. To several of the fathers of the modern nation, the Buddha provided a rational faith that could be weaponized against the hierarchies that still warp Indian society. Today, the Buddha continues to inspire people such as Siddhartha and Vijay in their struggles to assert their own individualities.

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Evidence for civilization on the Indian subcontinent dates back to at least 2500 BCE, when city settlements began to develop in the Indus Valley, in today's Pakistan. From these sites, archaeologists have excavated many objects, but the script of this civilization remains unintelligible to us—if it is a script at all. The composition of the earliest Vedas, the oldest sources of Hindu thought, seems to have begun roughly a millennium later. Beyond these hymns to the gods, though, we have no physical evidence of this world; and neither from the Indus Valley sites nor in the Vedas can we feel the pulse of any historical individuals. It's only a thousand or more years after the Vedas were composed, with the arrival of the Buddha, that real personalities appear to us on the stage of Indian history.

Even before it began to be written down, the story of the Buddha was given

permanence in painting and sculpture. In the oldest of the caves at Ajanta, in western India, are probably the earliest-surviving representations of the Buddha's life: vivid frescoes, some of which date back to the first century BCE. "There, in front of you, are the oldest Indian faces in existence," the writer and historian William Dalrymple says. "They inhabited a world incredibly different from ours. Yet you can look into the eyes of these people, of individuals, and their emotions are immediately recognizable."

Although scholars still debate the Buddha's exact dates, with an elastic range for his death that stretches from roughly 500 to 400 BCE, it's clear he lived in an era of remarkable invention worldwide. Within the space of a couple of centuries, Confucius articulated his social philosophy in China, written versions of the Old Testament crystallized in Palestine, and Socrates conducted the dialogues that would lay many of the foundations of Western philosophy. On the Gangetic Plains of northern India, iron tools, writing, and coinage were producing and circulating new wealth. Trade contacts with Persia and western Asia were creating cosmopolitan cities, bustling with commerce and competing ideas about how to live a good life. Many of the forms of Hinduism familiar to Indians today, as well as many conflicting worldviews, also took shape in this period.

The Buddha's life played out in the midst of this flux. He grew up within sight of the high mountains of Nepal, on the northern edges of the Magadha region. Social life was largely regulated by the rituals contained in the Vedas. These practices, and the sacred verses describing them, were in turn fiercely controlled by the priestly castes that constituted the highest varna, or estate, of men, the Brahmins.

But across Magadha, communities were beginning to reject both Brahminic power and Vedic rituals, such as animal sacrifice. Some of these communities were chiefdoms dominated by men from the warrior and trading varnas. The Buddha himself was a member of the second-highest varna, the Kshatriyas, made up of warrior castes. He was "a product of his own time," the Harvard scholar Charles Hallisey says, but he was also "an innovator, someone who creates something new in the world—and this tension is right at the centre of everything we think about who the Buddha was historically."

There are almost as many versions of how the Buddha developed his radical moral vision as there are Buddhist traditions around the world today. Perhaps the most well known, depicted on the walls of the Ajanta caves, is an inward drama: the story of one man's religious, psychological, and ethical

experimentation. After a cosseted upbringing, Siddhartha Gautama was deeply shaken by his first encounters with human suffering. (Let's set aside how sheltered he must have been, to have grown up *not* encountering suffering.) Undone by his belated exposure to worldly pain, he resolved to escape it. Renouncing his wealthy family, he took up the life of a wandering ascetic. "My body became extremely lean," he later said. "When I thought I would touch the skin of my stomach, I actually took hold of my spine."

Over the course of six years, Siddhartha explored a number of the spiritual practices and philosophies swirling around northern India, but his attempts to find a release from suffering proved fruitless. Then, after abandoning these efforts, he was jolted, Proust-like, by a childhood memory of how, as his father worked nearby, Siddhartha sat under the shade of a rose apple tree in a state of pure joy, "without sensual desires, without evil ideas." How could he recover that state? Days passed in mental struggle, and then one spring night, while sitting under a bodhi tree, he achieved it. And in that state, he believed he had grasped the causes of suffering, and its cure. He had now awakened, emerging from our worldly life of attachments, desires, and pain as if from an interminable dream.



Around five hundred kilometers south of Ajanta, in the rice paddy and cotton fields of northern Karnataka, is another major Buddhist site, Kanaganahalli, where the remains of a large domed reliquary shrine, or stupa, dating from roughly the first century BCE, were uncovered just twenty years ago. In the centuries after the Buddha's life, many ordinary, nonliterate Indians would have learned of him through Jatakas, popular morality tales about his imagined previous lives, which were often depicted on sculptural friezes that decorated stupas such as the one at Kanaganahalli. There is something particularly captivating about these sculptures, perhaps because the soft gray limestone gave the carvers a freer hand to imbue the friezes with a sense of liveliness and humor. But we also see the Buddha represented here just by symbols: an empty seat that expresses the extinction of his self, the bodhi tree where he reached enlightenment, and the *cakka*, or *cakra*, the great wheel, which has come to represent his teaching.

After waking into his new state of consciousness, the Buddha decided to share his liberating insights. He began to advocate a path he called the middle way, which avoided both asceticism and worldly indulgence. His teachings became the *dhamma*, which roughly means "law"; it was a set of principles to

be followed, but also a teaching about the principle, or essence, of suffering and experience. The term was originally a Brahmin one, the Sanskrit *dharma*, which prescribed a different law for each caste—laws that encompassed every dimension of life, from marriage to work to meals. The Buddha took this established term and bent it to his own purpose; his dhamma was a single ethical vision embracing all living beings. "Identify oneself with all," he taught—that is, regard every creature in the universe with compassion.

The Buddha's solution to suffering lay in the individual mind. Yet he was also sketching a new form of society. His relative egalitarianism is clear even from the language he used to teach his followers. Brahmins fiercely protected the Sanskrit in which the Vedas were expressed, and the lower orders were forbidden from learning this "language of the gods." Instead of Sanskrit, the Buddha used the local dialect of the people. He also dispensed with the idea of a deity, and with a priestly caste meant to direct social life according to scripture. As his following grew, he founded an order of monks, the *sangha*, which adopted broadly collectivist principles, taking important decisions through discussion in council and sharing much of what little property they were permitted to have. Low-caste members were allowed the same religious education that was open to other followers, another practice barred within Brahminic society. After some resistance—it seems the Buddha was not entirely immune from patriarchal attitudes—he allowed women to be admitted to the order as nuns. He also rejected doctrines of predestination, by which birth supposedly determined people's roles in society. He was a moral meritocrat, and to an extent a social one, too.



Following the Buddha's death, his teachings spread first by word of mouth and then by imperial enthusiasm. In the third century BCE, India's greatest empire-builder, *Ashoka* (5), embraced the Buddha's teachings and accelerated their transmission throughout India, inscribing on pillars and rock faces across the subcontinent messages inspired by them. Judging from the archaeological evidence alone, India for much of the next thousand years seems to have been at least as much Buddhist as it was Hindu.

By the seventh century CE, things had visibly changed. Xuanzang, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim visiting the way stations of the Buddha's life in northern India, found a dwindling community of monks and roughly a thousand monasteries "deserted and in ruins. They are filled with wild shrubs, and solitary to the last degree." How did this come to pass? In short, we don't know.

As Xuanzang traveled, he recorded stories of attacks on Buddhist holy sites, including the toppling of the original bodhi tree where the Buddha had found enlightenment. Later Tibetan and other Buddhist chronicles also mention Hindu hostilities against the faith. What's clearer, historically, is that Buddhism eventually came under assault from Muslim marauders—for instance, in the devastating twelfth-century sack of Nalanda, a great center of Buddhist learning, which forever destroyed a major storehouse of human knowledge.

But it's possible that Hinduism also adapted over the centuries in ways that allowed it to win back followers. Around the start of the Common Era, there were efforts to formalize the great Hindu epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and legal treatises such as the Manusmriti, or the Laws of Manu. Some scholars see in these works attempts to incorporate Buddhist ideas in order to neutralize and rebut Buddhism—effecting a kind of Brahminic counterreformation. After all, Hinduism has never been a fixed doctrine moored to a single sacred text: it remained multiple and in some respects labile, a fact that allowed it to absorb criticism and challenges.

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Once, in Japan, I traveled to the ancient capital of Nara to see its Buddhist temples and shrines. Built of massive timber beams, they've been protected, even burnished, by the wrap of Japanese civilization. So I was startled to come across images and statues bearing names I knew: Indian names for some of the Buddha's many incarnations. Discovering them in shrines used continuously for around twelve centuries, I was moved anew by the difficulty of the Buddha's course through the history of the land where he was born. The Sanskrit roots of the word *Buddha* mean "someone who has woken up." In India, Buddhism seemed to sleep for centuries. It was only the anguished choice of one of modern India's founding figures that summoned the Buddha back to life.

On October 14, 1956, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (41), the leader of a political movement to gain rights and dignity for the country's Dalits, stood on a stage in the city of Nagpur and formally converted to Buddhism. Before him, in the crowd, were some four hundred thousand or more of his followers. Though Ambedkar had been an architect of the new Indian Constitution, he doubted that lower-caste citizens would be able to thrive in what remained, despite his active struggle, a caste-dominated polity. After taking his own oaths, he turned to administer a set of conversion vows to the individuals in the massive crowd:

I renounce the Hindu religion which has obstructed the evolution of my former humanity and considered humans unequal and inferior . . . I regard all human beings as equals . . . From this time forward I vow that I will behave according to the Buddha's teachings.

Ambedkar was chiseling his own Buddha: near enough a social revolutionary, or an ancient Indian Rousseau. Like other founders of modern India, he was recycling historical figures who could be endowed with new life in order to solve the problems of Indian society—a little like the scrap shop workers just behind the Mumbai slum temple, sifting through their bags for something of continuing value.

MAHAVIRA

Soldier of Nonviolence

Fifth century BCE

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in India (along with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism). The man who systematized the Jain worldview, in the fifth century BCE, is known by the honorific Mahavira, which means "the great hero." Ahimsa, rigorous attachment to the truth, and the doctrine of *anekantavada* were central to Mahavira's teaching, and he would later be canonized by Gandhi (along with the Buddha and Tolstoy) as a "soldier" of nonviolence.

Mahavira, according to Jain tradition, was the last in a line of twenty-four superhuman figures known as *tirthankaras*, or "ford makers": beings who had crossed over from the mundane world of human suffering and violence and into the realm of spiritual liberation, and could help others do the same. In our human history, he was the descendant of a Kshatriya martial clan—like the **Buddha** (1), his contemporary in fifth-century Magadha. Also like the Buddha, he became one of the most compelling of a range of early Indian religious philosophers generally referred to as *Shramanas*, or "seekers"—renouncers who turned their backs on domestic life and explored various paths to individual spiritual liberation, while rejecting the priestly role of the Brahmin caste.

Mahavira's teachings shared many important features with the Buddha's; in particular, they both opposed beliefs at the core of the Vedas, the earliest Hindu texts, about the role of caste in spiritual life, the supremacy of the gods, and the indispensable nobility of ritual sacrifice. These sacrifices often required animal slaughter and supposedly generated a potent creative force that sustained both individual life and the cosmos.

The rejection of sacrificial rituals was especially significant for Mahavira and his followers. "All forms of existence, according to Jainism, are embodied souls—the Jain term is *jiva*, which means life force," explains Paul Dundas, a professor at the University of Edinburgh and a scholar of Jainism. For Jains, this life force is manifest not just in humans, animals, and plants; it is also present as unseen souls moving through earth, air, fire, and water. "So we are surrounded by life, and the correct stance towards this is to govern oneself," Dundas says, "to discipline one's behavior so that we can minimize the destruction of life, whether witting or unwitting."

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This, in essence, is the Jain doctrine of *ahimsa*, a direct inversion of Vedic beliefs about the sustaining powers of animal sacrifice. Mahavira's teachings

Mohandas Gandhi (38), the Mahatma, was fond of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. One blind man, grabbing the elephant's tail, said that an elephant was like a rope. Another, holding its trunk, countered that it was like a snake. A third, touching one of its legs, protested that it was really like a tree. Those touching its ears or sides made still other claims. All were "right from their respective points of view," Gandhi wrote in the mid-1920s, "and wrong from the point of view of one another, and right and wrong from the point of view of the man who knew the elephant."

For Gandhi, the parable illustrated "the doctrine of the many-sidedness of reality." "It is this doctrine that has taught me to judge a Mussalman from his own standpoint and a Christian from his," he continued. "I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice versa . . . My *anekantavada* is the result of the twin doctrine of *Satya* and *Ahimsa*."

Anekantavada, *satya*, and *ahimsa*: "many-sidedness," "truth," and "non-violence." These principles were particularly urgent for Gandhi in the 1920s, as relations between Hindus and Muslims slid into rioting and bloodshed. Though Gandhi would give these virtues his own characteristic twist, they were rooted deep in Indian thought, in a critique of Vedic Hinduism that coalesced in the Gangetic river basin some twenty-five hundred years ago. That critique eventually became Jainism, one of the four great religions born

required not only that one abstain from violent acts (except in extraordinary circumstances), but also, more important, that one adopt a fundamental stance of benign intention toward the world. Some have tried to connect this stance directly to *anekantavada*, as Gandhi did, claiming that the spirit of nonviolence informed an attitude of intellectual humility and religious tolerance that is manifest in the works of several important early Jain thinkers.

You can see the Jain attitude toward living creatures at a two-story hospital on the premises of the seventeenth-century Digambar Jain temple in Delhi's old city. The hospital is not for humans, but for birds. In its four hundred cages, cooled by ceiling fans, fluttering convalescents are fed compound medicine and liquid protein and then released into the air, or into the arms of little boys, who race home with their healed roosters.

Strict Jain vegetarianism prohibits the eating not just of animals or eggs, but also of root vegetables, in part because pulling them from the ground disturbs the lives of other plants and little creatures. Today, in the Chowpaty area of South Mumbai, which is home to many Jain laypeople, these dietary guidelines are adhered to even in the popular new Starbucks.

The stereotypical image of the Jain renunciant is a monk (or possibly nun) dutifully sweeping the ground gently before him with a small broom, so that he doesn't tread on any living creatures, with his mouth covered to prevent the accidental swallowing of any small bugs. Yet Mahavira took his inversion of Vedic Hinduism one step further, transforming the *tapas*, or heat, of the Brahminic sacrificial fire into the *tapas*, or austerity, of a severe personal discipline. For the Jains, salvation might indeed be the sum of sacrifices: not of living beings, but of one's self.

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Most of what we know about the life of Mahavira derives from two Jain hagiographies: the proselytizing *Kalpa Sutra*, written centuries after Mahavira, and the earlier *Acharanga Sutra*, which supposedly contains his own words. (There are also tantalizing references to Mahavira in some relatively early Buddhist texts.) Mahavira was born Vardhaman, the son of a clan leader, in Kundagrama, a kingdom in today's Bihar—though his exact place of birth remains a subject of contentious village rivalries in the state's pilgrim tourist trade. In the *Kalpa Sutra*, his anti-Brahminism predates even his birth: in the nick of time, Mahavira's embryo was transplanted from the womb of a Brahmin woman into a woman from the Kshatriya caste. He was also apparently a very early adopter of nonviolence: the *Kalpa Sutra* reports that he kept calm and

still in his mother's womb, so as not to discomfort her, though he quivered from time to time to reassure her he was alive.

The *Acharanga Sutra* paints a strikingly austere picture of Mahavira's life. Much in his story echoes the biography we have inherited for the Buddha, though with differences that seem calibrated to depict Mahavira as the more benign, rigorous, and therefore righteous of the two. Brahminic male ideals of maintaining a household were not for Mahavira. In some Jain accounts, he was married with a child before he left to become a celibate; in others, he was celibate for life. But the traditions agree that he abandoned a comfortable (and probably aristocratic) home to wander naked and alone through the wilderness. In at least one version of the Mahavira story, his renunciation was more sensitively plotted than that of the Buddha, who supposedly fled in the middle of the night, abandoning his wife and son. Mahavira is said to have waited, better mannered, until after his elderly parents died, so as not to upset them.

Mahavira's path toward enlightenment began with a famously violent, flamboyant act. For him (and subsequently for his disciples), it was not enough to shave his head as the Buddhists did. "After fasting two and a half days without drinking water," the *Kalpa Sutra* says, Mahavira "put on a divine robe, and, quite alone, nobody else being present, he tore out his hair . . . and entered the state of houselessness."

He was thirty years old, roughly the same age as the Buddha was at his renunciation; but his period of mendicant wandering lasted twelve years, twice as long as the Buddha's phase of spiritual experimentation. During these years, Mahavira engaged in deep reflective meditation and harsh physical penances, eating next to nothing and suffering the violent contempt of those who couldn't fathom his actions. He finally found enlightenment at the age of forty-two, in a characteristically self-punishing way. "The Buddha is always depicted as sitting underneath the Tree of Enlightenment," Dundas says. In contrast, "a very old description of Mahavira's enlightenment has him sitting near this tree, but under the heat of a blazing sun, squatting on his heels in a rather uncomfortable position, and maintaining this position for two and a half days until he attained enlightenment."

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If Mahavira's austerity represented a direct challenge to Brahminism, and stood as a reproach to the softer "middle path" of the Buddha, it was nevertheless a clear extension of the martial mores of Mahavira's warrior caste—though directed to a very different end. As Dundas puts it, "The notion of

vigour, of heroism, very much informs the Jain ascetic ideal. I think in a modern world, many of us view asceticism in rather more negative terms. But fasting, forms of physical torture or pain which certain types of religious people have always inflicted on themselves—in India this was regarded in a highly positive way, as almost a form of warrior activity.” As it would later be for Gandhi (38), the endurance of physical and psychological hardship was seen as necessary to becoming a nonviolent actor.

This conquering spirit extended itself into the intellectual realm. The disputes reflected in the biographies of the Buddha and Mahavira were set within a broader context of intellectual competition between rival philosophers and teachers. Alongside the Kalpa and Acharanga Sutras, one of the earliest Jain texts contains the doctrines of sects with whom the Jains actively disagreed. These may have included materialists, who denied the existence of a spiritual realm and therefore the possibility of salvation, and fatalists, who denied that human beings could exert any influence whatsoever on their paths to spiritual liberation.

Mahavira and subsequent Jains attacked these views, basing their own claims to preeminence on the rigorous requirements of Jain religious practice, and on their analysis of reality. These, in turn, were supposedly the fruits of revelation. According to Jainism, Mahavira's enlightenment, and the enlightenments of the other ford makers, constituted a state of omniscience. We might say that he became like the man who knew the elephant for what it was, and could help transmit that knowledge to his followers.

Yet such a thoroughgoing philosophical victory contained a paradox within it. The Jain analysis of reality was founded largely on *anekantavada*, the doctrine of many-sidedness, with its inherent critique of the limitations of human understanding. On what basis, then, could Mahavira and his philosophy claim to speak from a position of omniscience? This was also a problem for later commentators who wished to link *anekantavada* directly to *ahimsa*. While the early Jains may have been socially tolerant, they maintained a faith in their own intellectual and religious certitude. Ultimately, *anekantavada* was not a doctrine of relativism: the blind men were, in the end, arguing over the same elephant. As Dundas has written, “Jainism's consistent historical stance with regard to itself is that . . . it is at the most profound level different from and superior to other paths.”

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Today, we can see Mahavira's brand of extreme asceticism and spiritual confidence embodied in the beautiful sculptural forms of the Jain tradition, which

represent the ford makers and other mythical Jains. With spare, powerful physiques and lustrous skin—a luster, it is said, that comes with the renunciation of many foods—these sculptures stand in an ethereal nakedness, which was once described by the German Indologist Heinrich Zimmer as “a strange but perfect aloofness, a nudity of chilling majesty.” So still are they in their rejection of earthly life that they often have climbing vines carved around their thighs.

The most remarkable of these monoliths is the statue of Bahubali, or Gommat, who, according to one Jain sect, was the first person other than a ford maker to achieve liberation. Erected at the end of the tenth century, in a period when Buddhism and Buddhist sites in India seem to have been under attack, it still looms above the plains of southern Karnataka. At seventeen meters high and eight meters wide, it's one of the biggest statues of the human form anywhere in the world.

Despite Jainism's intellectual aggression, and its hostility to the power of the Brahmin caste, over the course of its history the religion seems to have engendered little retaliatory violence. Perhaps *ahimsa* made the Jains seem innocuous, or perhaps the Jains themselves recognized that a religion whose monastic and lay members were drawn largely from the middle and lower castes could not afford to antagonize its neighbors and trading partners. At the same time, the austerity that protected the religion may also have limited its appeal, and prevented it from spreading, as Buddhism did, outside India. Remaining small in scale, perhaps it was never seen as a threat.

The faith also saw internal schisms. One issue that continues to divide the Jain community is whether women, too, can advance on the path to enlightenment. The strictest of the leading Jain traditions contends that women can't be ordained ascetics, since their bodies produce eggs that are killed during menstruation. In addition, it argues that only those who abandon all possessions, clothes included, and live “sky clad”—the lovely Jain phrase for nakedness—can wander toward grace.

It was difficult in Mahavira's time to be a hard-core Jain practitioner, and it is difficult in modern India, too. Attributed to him are five uncompromising ethical rules that continue to guide Jains in their struggle toward salvation: the renunciation of killing, of speaking untruths, of sexual pleasure, of greed, and of all attachments to living beings and nonliving things. Of course, not all five million or so current followers of Jainism can strictly adhere to these principles. There is a large lay community, especially among the trading castes, that, while observing strict vegetarianism, continues to do business,

procreate, and support the small number of Jain monks and, in some sects, nuns.

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So why did Gandhi, as he advocated his views on religious tolerance and nonviolence amid the turmoil of pre-Independence India, reach for this ancient, renunciatory tradition? It has been argued that his understanding of nonviolence was shaped more by the example of Christ, and specifically by Tolstoy's ideas, than by Jainism. Yet perhaps the political message of Gandhi's nonviolence, which extended beyond the Jain conception, at the same time demanded a specifically Indian expression. Gandhi was not only pursuing religious amity; he was fighting for freedom from the British, for a sovereign India for Indians. And, for him, Indian self-rule had to begin with rule over the self, something he believed his soldiers of nonviolence had achieved. "Only they saw deeper and truer in their profession, and found the secret of a true, happy, honorable and godly life," Gandhi wrote of them. "Let us be joint sharers with these teachers and this land of ours will once more be the abode of gods."

PANINI

Catching the Ocean in a Cow's Hoofprint

Fourth century BCE

At the end of the last century, Bangalore became synonymous with Indian software. In this century, it's not entirely outlandish to think that Indians may become synonymous with American start-ups. Already, according to Google's Eric Schmidt, around 40 percent of start-ups in California's Silicon Valley are run by people from Indian backgrounds.

One reason for this predominance is that Indians have the highest incomes of any group of American immigrants, and can secure elite, high-tech U.S. educations. Similarly rigorous educations can be acquired in India, at places such as the Indian Institutes of Technology, modeled on MIT and established by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Yet perhaps there is another, subtler reason for the rise of Indians in IT, one that takes us back twenty-five hundred years, to the original nerd.

His name was Panini, and he created, in what amounts to a mere forty pages, the most complete linguistic system in history. This masterwork, known as the *Aṣṭadhyāyī*, or *Eight Chapters*, helped to make Sanskrit the lingua franca of the Asian world for more than a thousand years. "It's one of the most astonishing intellectual achievements of the human mind, and a very beautiful system," Paul Kiparsky, a professor of linguistics at Stanford University, says. "It's intensely pleasurable to explore—and one reason to be pre-occupied with it is that there's so much more to find out."

Panini was born into the Brahmin varna, the highest of the Hindu orders, and the only one whose members were permitted to use the Sanskrit language. It's believed he lived around the fourth century BCE, in the subcontinent's northwest, in a town called Salatura, near today's Peshawar, close to Pakistan's border with Afghanistan. The outlines of Panini's life are misty, but the imprint of his mind on the *Aṣṭadhyāyī* is unmistakable. It's quite clearly the work of a single individual, an ancient obsessive fascinated with deconstructing things in order to understand how they work.

What Panini took apart and held up to the light of his mind was Sanskrit, the language of the Vedas. Transmitted by memorized recitation, the sounds and rhythms of these sacred hymns and incantations, and the language itself, were believed to reflect eternal truths about the universe. To analyze and understand this language, the task of Brahminic scholars, or pandits, such as Panini, was nothing less than to grasp the nature of the cosmos. "Precisely understanding human action, which includes language, is a source of religious merit," Kiparsky explains. "Just as in yoga, the idea is that we breathe mindful of the breath itself, and that is a way toward salvation—so, if we speak mindful of the structure of the system underlying speech, that also brings us closer to salvation."

Sanskrit means "perfectly made." It is a language of extraordinary precision. In English, for example, the role that nouns play in a sentence (subject, direct object, indirect object, and so forth) can usually be gleaned only from the context. But Sanskrit uses eight different suffixes to embed these meanings into the form of the words themselves. You can tell from a single Sanskrit noun, even in isolation, its syntactical function: that is, whether it is the possessor of some object or quality, the instrument with which some action was performed, the location where a process unfolded, and more. Other features of the language can be equally expressive of such subtleties.

Panini set out to capture in exacting detail how this sacred language worked. To do this, he needed what linguists call a metalanguage—a way of talking about the features and structure of Sanskrit that wasn't entirely present in Sanskrit itself. When you encounter terms like *noun* and *indirect object* in English, you're encountering bits of a metalanguage invented so we can better discuss the language. Panini's metalanguage, however, had to be concise enough to be committed to memory and passed on orally. Describing Sanskrit in ordinary terms would have been unwieldy, so he developed

a shorthand or code that he used to express its grammatical structure and other features.

To create his coded metalanguage, Panini borrowed the building blocks of Sanskrit. He split the spiritually charged language into its constituent sounds, and assigned to each a coded linguistic meaning. In Panini's system, various features of Sanskrit (noun cases, classes of sounds, and so on) are represented by abbreviations, often single syllables or letters. Panini then combined these abbreviations into verselike strings, or sutras, which set out the rules of Sanskrit in a highly compressed form. Take this sutra, for example, which consists entirely of code "words": *iko yaṇ aci*. Decoded and translated into English, it means "*i*, *u*, *r*, and *l* are replaced by *y*, *v*, *r* and *l* respectively when followed by a vowel." Though one recent English translation ran to more than thirteen hundred pages, the four thousand sutras that Panini created to describe Sanskrit's phonology, morphology, and syntax can be recited in around two and a half hours.

Concision was only one of Panini's goals. He wanted his account of Sanskrit to be exhaustive as well. This ambition was far greater than it might at first seem: Panini didn't want his system just to describe all the features of Sanskrit; he wanted it to be capable of generating a virtually infinite number of well-formed words and grammatically correct sentences. Any Sanskrit utterance from the Vedas, or any possible Sanskrit sentence created elsewhere in the world, should be derivable using Panini's system.

This aim led Panini to his most important innovation. The sutras of the *Aṣṭadhyāyī* were expressed as a set of procedures for transforming linguistic inputs (for example, the equivalent of the English *to be*) into various well-formed Sanskrit outputs (such as "they are" and "they have been," instead of "they been" and "they have are"). He structured these rules so that they would interact in highly complex ways—like the steps of a tough algorithm, or the lines of a computer program. The outputs that were produced by some rules could become the inputs of other rules, and could combine with other outputs to become the inputs of still further rules—and so on. Through combinations of a finite number of general rules and specific exceptions, the system could transform basic linguistic inputs (many of which were listed in appendices to the *Aṣṭadhyāyī*) into a limitless number of grammatical words and sentences—some of which may not even be part of actual usage.

In modern linguistics, Panini's system is what's known as a "generative grammar." The term was coined only in the late 1950s, when contemporary research into language finally caught up with what Panini and his subsequent

pandit commentators had been doing for twenty-five hundred years. (There is a story to be written tracing the direct links between Panini's work and the emergence of modern linguistics: three founders of the field—Ferdinand de Saussure, Leonard Bloomfield, and Zellig Harris—were all scholars of Sanskrit.)

Kiparsky was part of the first-generation students of the Western version of this type of linguistics. "When I started studying generative grammar with Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle back in 1962, we were trying to write precise and comprehensive descriptions of languages," he says. "Our main interest was in the question of what all languages have in common and how it's possible to acquire a language. In order to study that question, we tried to construct explicit and comprehensive grammars. I was quite amazed to find that Panini already had one that was beautifully constructed. It's a kind of miracle that this was achieved on the basis of one language." So awesome was Panini's ability to articulate and compress the rules of Sanskrit that it was said he had managed to capture the ocean in a cow's hoofprint.



The Sanskrit word used to describe Panini's work is *vyakarana*. Often translated as "grammar," its meaning is broader—something closer to "language analysis." Among pandits, *vyakarana* was one of the six "auxiliary sciences," or "limbs," of the Veda, learning not found within the Vedas, but essential for comprehending them. These ancillary disciplines were the mother lodes of Sanskrit knowledge, the basis of all other understanding. Among them, *vyakarana* was preeminent; it was known as the *sastranam sastram*, the "science of sciences."

Indeed, many scholars have seen *vyakarana* as the paradigm for other major fields of inquiry in ancient India, such as astronomy and philosophy. The Dutch linguist and philosopher Frits Staal, for one, often compared the derivational qualities of Panini's grammar to the deductive principles of Euclid's geometry, and argued that Panini had played as foundational a role in creating standards for inquiry and knowledge in India as Euclid had in the Hellenistic world, and later in the West. At the very least, many if not all the classical Indian thinkers who subsequently worked in Sanskrit would have studied the language's grammar "and therefore undergone the influence of Panini."

Though the extent of the epistemological influence of Panini's grammar remains uncertain, its broader cultural impact was undeniable. In large part

because Sanskrit was considered the timeless language of the divine, it also had extraordinary currency in the historical world of men. Perhaps paradoxically, no one seems to have done more to enable the extension of this currency than Panini.

In Panini's own time, Sanskrit was monopolized by Brahmins like him, and confined to a relatively small area of India's northwest (though he himself recognized, and designed the *Aṣṭadhyāyī* so that it could cope with, regional variations and non-Vedic uses of Sanskrit). But the language's privileged status made it desirable to other social orders and religious traditions, and Sanskrit gradually took wing. It became a language in which great works of literature were composed and, as it spread in the centuries after Panini, helped give India a cultural and social cohesion that no political power would be able to establish until at least the twentieth century. It also did something else: it made India an exporter of cultural capital. From the start of the Common Era and for well over a millennium thereafter, Sanskrit bound together a huge civilizational territory, continental in scale.

Sheldon Pollock, a professor of Sanskrit at Columbia University, has called this the "Sanskrit cosmopolis." At its peak, a quarter of the world's population lived within it. Sanskrit became, he says, "the sign, across this vast space, for a kind of style of polity and civility and beauty—across an entire world, from Afghanistan to Java. And it lasted for a thousand years, because it was cool, it was beautiful. It was a sign of participating in a big world—you're not just a little local person; you have people in Cambodia quoting you and you're living in Delhi."

For Sanskrit recitations on the Indochinese peninsula to feature the work of northern Indian poets, regional variation had to be kept to an absolute minimum. Cambodian princes wrote a Sanskrit no different from poets in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat. Panini's grammar played a role in securing that coherent intelligibility, setting standards to which later users of classical Sanskrit strove to adhere. As literacy spread through the subcontinent, his oral codification of Sanskrit was eventually written down. Ultimately, this made it harder to restrict access to the classical Sanskrit that Panini in large part helped create. In this way, the revered *vyakarana* of the Brahmin Panini became a pathway for the expansion of Sanskrit to new groups, both within and beyond the Hindu varna system. From its origins as the language of power, Sanskrit became the language in which people could create and participate in a shared literary imagination—one that sometimes questioned power itself.

It's not that Panini and his system somehow "froze" Sanskrit, stultifying

the language even as they made it more broadly accessible. As Pollock points out, despite the normative influence that the *Aṣṭadhyāyī* exerted, Sanskrit continued to evolve, just as it had in Panini's day. That the language eventually declined had to do most likely with global and local politics, especially the rise of Persian, which was spread, often by the sword, by central Asian Muslim empires that conquered northern India at the start of the thirteenth century.

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Today, you can hear Sanskrit intoned in temple and family rituals and practiced in classrooms, but it's no longer a language of intellectual inquiry or debate. Governments can proclaim "Sanskrit weeks," and millions of students are made to endure Sanskrit classes each year in Indian schools, but most learn absolutely nothing. In 2014 some ministers in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government, revivalist in their hopes, even took their Cabinet oaths in the language. Yet it's all a bit of a sham.

With the decline of Sanskrit learning came a decline in popular interest in Panini, though the novelist Vikram Chandra recently did his part to reverse the trend. A former computer programmer, he wrote a book about software and Sanskrit called *Geek Sublime: The Beauty of Code, the Code of Beauty*—in its way, an ode to the great grammarian.

To Chandra, the lack of appreciation for Panini reflects a "kind of post-colonial amnesia," a condition that endures despite the many realms in which Panini's influence can still be felt. "He plays a very important role in the growth of modern linguistics," Chandra says, "and in a very strange way he's connected to the world that we live in today, because all the programming languages that we use to change our landscape are in some sense dependent on some of his insights and ideas."

While there are resonances between Panini's work and the way computer programmers operate, any direct inheritance from his grammar to computer code is fanciful. Still, there may in fact be a more oblique connection between the decline of Sanskrit scholarship and the success of Indians in the world of information technology. Pollock puts it this way:

Did the best minds go into Western science? Did the best minds go into business? Did the best minds go into politics? Did the best minds start writing code? If you look at the backgrounds of a lot of the kids in Bangalore—they've told me, "Oh, you are a Sanskritist. My

great-grandfather was a wonderful Sanskritist." So, long traditions of literacy, particularly in Sanskrit, have produced the kind of brilliance that has allowed India to emerge as one of the great IT capitals of the world. I don't think that it's accidental that India makes software and China makes hardware. Software requires a certain kind of literacy, and I think this was in part a Sanskritic literacy.

Sanskrit's decline represents a serious break in contact with India's classical traditions—and with it, a loss of the multiplicity of voices, often dissenting and inventive, that those traditions contained. For Sanskrit became something more than just the prerogative of the Brahmins. From its origins as the language of power, it became the language in which people sought to disrupt power, and to explore the literary imagination. Unlike other global languages—Latin, Arabic, or English—Sanskrit spread not through conquest or colonization, but because it served a purpose. It's consoling to imagine it has a new purpose, helping to build a new cosmopolis, the global world of IT.

KAUTILYA

The Ring of Power

First century BCE/CE

A little over a hundred years ago, in southern India's princely state of Mysore, a humble librarian chanced upon a monumental discovery. Rudrapatnam Shamashastry worked at the Mysore Government Oriental Library, a cream-colored jumble of classical Greek pillars and faux-Hindu architectural motifs, built in 1887 to commemorate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee. Shamashastry's job was to look after the library's ancient manuscripts, many of which were fragmentary and crumbling. One day, shortly before 1905, a nameless "Brahmin from Tanjore" arrived at the library and handed him a manuscript made out of dried palm leaves. Although Shamashastry had never seen anything like it, he quickly realized its significance. Here was a Sanskrit text that may have lain unread for almost a thousand years—and that would revolutionize our sense of the Indian past.

Written on those palm leaves was the two-millennia-old *Arthashastra*, a massive, detailed treatise on statecraft and the art of government. The opening folios enumerated the contents of the work, ranging from chapters on the "Establishment of Clandestine Operatives" and "Pacifying a Territory Gained" to the "Surveillance of People with Secret Income" and "Investigation Through Interrogation and Torture." Eerily contemporary, this is the only complete text on nonreligious matters to reach us from the classical or early period of Indian history. Its discovery summarily exploded a Western cliché: that Indians were primarily ethereal, spiritual thinkers. Here was a strategic

work focused on worldly ends, advocating ruthless means to achieve and maintain power.

Shamashastry started to publish bits of the *Arthashastra* in English translation in 1905. The reaction in India and beyond was electric. He released more sections of the text, rather like a Victorian serialized novel, as the audience grew. Soon the mysterious treatise not only was providing historians with an unprecedented wealth of detail about early India, but had proven to be a timely gift for those seeking freedom from colonial rule.

The publication of the first translations coincided with an event that led many in Asia, and in India, to believe that their star was now ascendant while the West's was in decline: 1905 was the year of the naval battle at Tsushima, in which the Japanese dealt Russia a shocking defeat. It was the first modern victory of an Asian nation over a Western power, and it encouraged Indians to think of themselves as part of a common Asian world. (On hearing news of the Japanese victory led by Admiral Togo, a fifteen-year-old Jawaharlal Nehru, then on his way to boarding school at Harrow, sent a one-line postcard to his cousin: "Three Cheers for Togo.") The ancient manuscript would help Indian nationalists imagine a realpolitik for an aspiring India of the twentieth century. Here was a self-help manual for a start-up nation.

After the Indian uprising of 1857, when violence across northern and central India seriously threatened colonial rule (see 23, **Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi**), there had been a hardening of British attitudes toward the country. "The narrative shifted," says Shivshankar Menon, a former national security adviser to the Indian prime minister, and one of the country's most distinguished diplomats. "Many of the subsequent histories written by outsiders were about how there was no domestic tradition of history, which is false; that there was no domestic tradition of statecraft, which is also false. This is why the discovery of the *Arthashastra*, rightly or wrongly, was so useful to the nationalists to help build a consciousness, a sense of India's own past and what India could do."

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At the Mysore library, now known as the Oriental Research Institute, the *Arthashastra* is presented like a sumptuous dish, or a holy icon, on a plate bedecked with fresh flowers. Their scent mixes with the aroma of citronella oil, which the library uses to preserve its store of palm-leaf manuscripts. The pages are held together by a single length of string, and filled with the beautifully precise letters of the fifteen-hundred-year-old Grantha script. They

look almost as if they have been printed, but the words have all been meticulously inscribed by hand.

This manuscript would have been produced more than a thousand years after the *Arthashastra* was first composed. The original author is thought to have been a man known variously as Kautilya and Chanakya. Some have argued that he was the minister of the great king Chandragupta, who, in the fourth century BCE, laid the foundations of the Mauryan Empire, India's first and for a long time its largest imperium (see 5, *Ashoka*). Although the manuscript would be forgotten, Kautilya, or Chanakya, became the subject of stories and legends throughout Indian history.

As far back as the Gupta Empire, in the fifth century CE, we find a dramatization of the life of Chanakya, or Kautilya—both names are used, along with a third one, Vishnugupta—set in the Mauryan court. The Sanskrit play *Mudraraksasa*, or “The Ring of Power,” by Vishakhadatta, sought to embellish the imperial ambitions of the Guptas by linking their reign back to the era of the Mauryas, some seven hundred years previously. It is an early example of the kind of appropriation of past lives that recurs across Indian history, as Indians search for glorious precursors to embody their aspirations. In the fifth century CE play, Kautilya comes into possession of a signet ring belonging to the minister of a rival king, and uses it to impersonate and intrigue so that his own king ascends to the imperial throne.

In another popular story, Kautilya overhears a mother telling off her hungry, impatient child for burning his hand by sticking it in the middle of a bowl of hot gruel. Eat from the edges of the bowl, the mother says. It's cooler there. From this, Kautilya develops an innovative theory of conquest: Don't attack an opponent's capital. Move in, stealthily, from the periphery. As a result of such stories, Kautilya is often presented as the Bismarckian mind behind the great Mauryan emperor Chandragupta's conquests. Sadly, recent scholarship says the dates of the two men don't align. Yet if Kautilya the man remains veiled, the *Arthashastra* itself stands out within the Indian tradition—and beyond. The conception of power it embodies includes military might, but goes well beyond it, encompassing the use of wit and intellect as well as guile, cunning, and deceit. “An arrow unleashed by an archer may kill a single man or not kill anyone,” the author writes. “But a strategy unleashed by a wise man kills even those still in the womb.”

If we lay the *Arthashastra* alongside other accounts of power and politics from its broad historical era—the works of, say, Plato or Aristotle, with their focus on moral virtue—we can see how unique its perspective is. Many com-

pare it to the treatise that disrupted Western ethical and religious beliefs in the sixteenth century, Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince*. But Max Weber, the German social theorist, thought such a comparison anodyne. To him, the *Arthashastra*'s radicalism made *The Prince* look “harmless.”

Kautilya's work suggests he inhabited a world unlike the clan-led oligarchic society into which the **Buddha** (1) and **Mahavira** (2) were born. His world was one of kings in perpetual conflict. “Kautilya for the most part is a political strategist,” says Patrick Olivelle, a professor emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin, and the most recent translator of the *Arthashastra*. “He is serving a king and trying to enhance that king's power. And for ‘king’ he uses a very technical term in Sanskrit, *vijigishu*, which means a person who is yearning, desiring to conquer. So conquest, expanding one's power, is at the heart of the Kautilyan strategy.” Kautilya specifies no particular territory or space to be subjugated; it is potentially and rightfully the entire earth.

The grandiosity of these imperial ambitions embodies a high degree of fantasy, but the world Kautilya imagined—of circles, or mandalas, of competing influence and interests, in which one's enemy's enemy was one's friend—is a familiar one. “This man was thinking about the same problems that we think about,” Shivshankar Menon says. “And he was thinking about it in a situation where there were many states, which is very much like the situation we're in today—a multi-polar world.” According to Menon, this was a vision of politics that would only coalesce in the West after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which brought an end to the Thirty Years' War by establishing a system of sovereign states in Europe.

A ruthless, if strategic, expansionary policy was only part of Kautilya's vision for the state. However much his ideal king might dream of exercising power without restraint, he was always enmeshed in dependencies—the concentric circles of enemies, and the allies needed to subdue them. Above all, the king (drawn from the Kshatriya, or warrior, varna) could never gain authority simply by amassing power. He was caught in a dilemma facing all rulers in India: how to combine his power with the authority only the Brahmin priestly order could claim. Some have called this India's “inner conflict of tradition.” To acquire legitimacy, a ruler has to show his disinterest in worldly power for its own sake and to manifest a renunciatory streak—but never so much as to hobble his pursuit of power. The never-ending struggle to achieve that balance continues to challenge India's rulers today.

In part to address this dilemma, Kautilya urged his king to adopt a benign aspect. “Power is sought after for itself—that's one side of it,” Olivelle

says. “But the Indian concept of kingship has a different angle also. The king is viewed as a father, as the person who is actually looking after the interests of his subjects, who are called *prajaa*, which also means children. So in a sense Kautilya weaves into his narrative these two somewhat opposite and irreconcilable goals of political power.”



In the balancing act between liberty, security, and prosperity, the *Arthashastra* places its weight behind the latter two. To fulfill his functions, a king requires wealth and the means to maintain a well-ordered state. These concerns are very much at the center of the *Arthashastra*, whose title means something like the “Treatise on Success.” Four main sources of wealth were central to the empire that Kautilya imagined: resources acquired through imperial expansion; revenues from royal monopolies; trade with other kingdoms; and taxes collected from private enterprise, especially agriculture. Indeed, Kautilya was no early advocate of the free market. Olivelle characterizes his prescriptions as “a mixed economy,” not unlike the one practiced by post-Independence India—or the British East India Company. At the same time, “a lot of private enterprise was allowed and encouraged,” Olivelle says, particularly through the relief of taxation, the creation of infrastructure, and the maintenance of security.

The government Kautilya describes was a vast bureaucracy designed to regulate both economic and social life. And the watchers had, above all, to be watched; Kautilya mentions forty forms of embezzlement and, in a memorable image, captures the endemic, often invisible corruption that is present even in India today: “Just as it is impossible to know when fish, moving about in water, are drinking water, so it is impossible to know when officers appointed to carry out tasks are embezzling money.”

The sovereign’s tools of control included not only officialdom, but also propaganda, coercion, domestic espionage, and violence. Among other things, Kautilya offers extensive guidance on how a ruler should win over his own people by “seduction”: the king should perform illusory acts to give him the aura of miraculous powers, and should make liberal use of manipulation. He should also cultivate an army of spies, and Kautilya devotes a whole section of his treatise to “Secret Conduct.” Quite often these agents were “monks” (men with “shaven heads or matted hair”) and even nuns. They flitted among the populace, collecting information and, if necessary, seeding uncertainty, mistrust, and fear, thus reinforcing the need for a powerful, paternal king.

Kautilya seems to have taken particular pleasure in the details of punish-

ment. Wherever *lèse-majesté* was exposed, strict royal action was needed. Here, for instance, is his catalogue of the “eighteen-fold torture” to be meted out to real reprobates:

Nine strokes with a cane, twelve whiplashes, two thigh encirclings, twenty strokes with a *nakta mala* stick, thirty-two slaps, two scorpion bindings, and two hangings-up, needle in the hand, burning one joint of a finger of one who has drunk gruel, heating in the sun for one day for one who has drunk fat, and a bed of *balbaja* points on a winter night.

Beatings, exposure to extreme temperatures, suspension torture—not so different from what’s in the 2014 U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report on the CIA’s “enhanced interrogation techniques.” Indeed, Kautilya’s conception of the state is disturbingly familiar today: like an iceberg, one part towers above us, a beacon of majestic power, while another part hides in the deep—a state of secrecy, duplicity, manipulation, and constant surveillance.

Yet this sort of power proves, in the end, to be a trap. A ruler cannot trust his own officials. Kautilya warns, “Even if it is possible to know the path of birds as they are flying in the air, it is never possible to know the path of officials as they move with concealed designs.” He must ever be wary of his retinue. As Patrick Olivelle puts it:

The subject of the king’s food becomes important because poisoning the king is one of the easiest ways to get rid of him. There are all these people, including his family, who are the greatest threat to him personally, who are vying to get rid of him. It becomes a real treadmill: he does not know where a threat may come from—and it can come from anywhere.

If this sounds like the kind of paranoia worthy of Saddam Hussein or Colonel Gaddafi, there’s another piece of Kautilyan practice that they both followed: reduce the risk of assassination by employing a double. The author of the *Arthashastra* was a man who clearly understood the travails of power and captured the paradoxical instabilities of those who rule: their minds are eternally filled with the fear of losing what they have acquired.



Kautilya’s treatise eventually proved too radical in at least one respect: it showed no deference to Brahminic conceptions of dharma, to religious ethics

and moral duties. You might call it a profoundly disenchanted work. As Olivelle has argued, the text must have been modified a few centuries after it was composed in order, in part, to bring the decidedly secular *Arthashastra* "more into line with the mainstream of Brahminical social ideology."

In this century, in a subcontinent where kings no longer reign, the *Arthashastra* has been repurposed. It's become a how-to guide for ambitious entrepreneurs seeking to amass wealth in an increasingly competitive and globalizing country, much in the same way that Sun Tzu's *Art of War* has become a manual for the world's aspiring business leaders. It's also become a touchstone for foreign policy wonks in the nationalist slipstream, struggling to devise a distinctively Indian view of international relations and India's place in the world. And in the Pakistani military, Kautilya's work gets assigned to young officers to give them insights into the supposed deviousness of the Indian mind.

Some other suggested reading for Pakistani military schools might be a 1937 essay published in Calcutta's *Modern Review*. It attacks a young politician then still on the rise in India's freedom movement, Jawaharlal Nehru, for his authoritarian, antidemocratic tendencies and his will to dominate. Its author was Chanakya, the variant of Kautilya—clearly a pseudonym. The real author was in fact Nehru himself, who only a decade later would become democratic India's first elected leader, and who did much to establish India as a democracy, serving for many years in Parliament House. But his article implied that inside every democrat is a Chanakyan, totalitarian temptation: that Kautilya is the Mr. Hyde lurking in every democratic Dr. Jekyll.

ASHOKA

Power as Persuasion

304–232 BCE

Every time someone mails a letter or hands over a currency note in India, every time an Indian bureaucrat stamps a document with an official seal, they are handling a symbol that dates back over two thousand years: four lions sculpted in stone, one facing in each direction. The man who created this potent and enduring icon is a towering, mysterious figure in India's history, a king from the third century BCE whose ideas (above all, that a ruler must accept the diversity of his subjects' beliefs) were long forgotten, but returned to inspire the modern-day Indian state.

We know him today by the name Ashoka. To look at, he was unprepossessing—a bit of a lens breaker, as they say in Bollywood: short, fat, and famously afflicted by bad skin. Yet he was a lucky man, too, known in his lifetime as Devanampriya, "beloved of the gods." He transformed what was still a nascent sect, Buddhism, into a world religion, transmitting its ethical vision across the subcontinent and the rest of Asia. And most unusually for a royal (in any country at the time or since), he spread his ideas not through violence, but through moral force and persuasion.

Emperor Ashoka reigned for nearly forty years, during an era when persuasion was not the usual *modus operandi*. He came to power around 268 BCE, when the Romans were fighting Carthage in the first of the Punic Wars, when Persia was engulfed in a civil war, and when, in China, the first Qin emperor was building his Great Wall. Most of the world's other empires

were trapped in warfare and isolationism. Ashoka's message was off-chord: it was about the need to reduce suffering and to pursue peace, openness, and tolerance. It was a message he took to his people through dozens of edicts, carved in stone and scattered the length and breadth of the subcontinent and beyond. Many of the edicts were on craggy rocks in remote corners such as Erragudi in today's Andhra Pradesh; some were etched in polished pillars and erected at strategic locations. And beside many of these pillars were Ashoka's lions, gazing down from on high.

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Ashoka came from India's first great empire, the Mauryan dynasty. He was the grandson of Chandragupta, who created the empire by force and who may have learned his lessons in realpolitik from the *Arthashastra*. (Some believe **Kautilya** [4] was Chandragupta's minister, though that's unlikely.) The Mauryan martial style of imperial conquest was continued by Ashoka's father, Bindusara, and Ashoka himself further extended the empire across the subcontinent, encompassing pretty much all of it except the southern tip. It wasn't until the British Raj that so much of India was incorporated under a single ruler again.

Empires are won by arms, but they are sustained by communications. Like their Roman contemporaries, the Mauryans built extensive roads. The most important of these was the Uttarapatha, or northern route, the Mauryan Royal Highway that began in Taxila, in the northwest plains of today's Pakistan. It swung down some two thousand kilometers to Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital, whose traces are now buried beneath the heaving city of Patna, in the eastern Indian state of Bihar. The highway drew a physical connection between the very different groups under Mauryan rule, from master-slave societies to caste-based farming communities to forest dwellers; from speakers of Greek and Aramaic to those who used Prakrit and other Indian languages. The route was later remade by the Mughals, and then by the British, as the Grand Trunk Road, or GTR, now India's smoky National Highway 1.

Where Ashoka stood out, even among the Mauryans, was in his mastery of communication. "Wherever there are stone pillars or stone slabs," he declared, in what is now known as the Seventh Pillar Edict, his words were to be engraved so that they "may long endure . . . as long as my sons and great-grandsons reign and as long as the sun and the moon shine." Like his lion capital, they *have* endured, speaking to us across more than two millennia. The Seventh Edict appears on a pillar that today stands in the ruins of

Delhi's Feroz Shah Kotla, but fragments of the same edict have also been unearthed as far west as Kandahar. We know of thirty-three edict texts altogether, and it seems likely each was inscribed at hundreds of sites throughout the empire. One has been found as far south as Karnataka.

As the Canadian scholar Harold Innis (a teacher of Marshall McLuhan) once argued, empires come in two forms. Some embed themselves in time: they favor heavy materials like stone and clay in which to record their communications, and this allows them to aspire to permanence, but requires that they rule in a more decentralized fashion. Other empires embed themselves in space: they tend to use lighter, more ephemeral materials (such as papyrus, paper, and palm leaf) that can be easily disseminated. This achieves a more centralized, but often less lasting, control. Ashoka was decidedly in the first camp.

The edicts were chiseled mainly in Prakrit (in a script known as Brahmi), the language spoken in the core area of Ashoka's empire, though several have been found in Greek and Aramaic scripts. Most of the edicts speak of Ashoka in the third person, but in some inscriptions, an enigmatic / surfaces, giving us a glimpse of his sensibility. He commanded his vast empire, he wanted his people to know, by hard work and a listening ear:

I have made the following arrangement: the reporters may appear before me for reporting the affairs of the people at any time and place, whether I am engaged in eating or am in the harem or in the bed-chamber or on a promenade or in a carriage or on the march.

One rock inscription, discovered a few decades ago on the wall of a rock shelter at Pangururia, in central India, is unexpectedly intimate, at least in one version: "The king, who is called Priyadarsin ['lovely to behold'] once came to this place on a pleasure tour while he was still a prince, living together with his unwedded consort." Not all scholars would accept that translation, but here, in words that cut through clouds of legend and centuries of religious and later nationalist consecration, one might detect the pulse of the young prince.

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To reconstruct Ashoka's life, we can glean clues from the rock inscriptions and from archaeological finds, and sift through religious stories, especially Buddhist ones. Both the legends and Ashoka's own words describe a life split in two, much like the life of the man who became his ethical master. The first part was spent in pursuit of worldly pleasure and power, and in the

exercise of brutality. The dispensing of moral instruction and benefaction came later.

The legends say that his father, the emperor Bindusara, took a dislike to the young Ashoka and sent him first to distant Taxila. The city had been part of Achaemenid Persia's sphere of influence—a cosmopolitan crossroads, far from the center of Mauryan power, where Ashoka was required to put down a rebellion. He was then sent as viceroy to the city of Ujjain, in central India. On his way there he fell in love with the daughter of a local merchant (the consort mentioned in that intimate wall graffiti). "Pleasure tours" seem to have become a pastime, earning him the name Kamashoka, "pleasure-seeking Ashoka."

Bindusara had chosen Ashoka's elder brother, Susima, to succeed him. But at their father's death, Ashoka rebelled. He killed Susima and, according to some legends, ninety-eight other brothers, the sons of Bindusara by various wives—more realistic is the story that has him killing off a mere six. What's clear is that it was a bloody, protracted struggle for the throne. Only after four years did Ashoka feel secure enough to crown himself. He was thirty-four years of age, hardly young; but he celebrated his accession by marrying another princess. Though his pleasure harem was large, some women found him repulsive. It is said he had them burned alive. Candashoka he was sometimes called: "Rage-filled Ashoka."

Brutal intemperance also marked his first campaign of imperial conquest, in 261/60 BCE, a war against the Kalingas, who ruled what is now Odisha state. "One hundred and fifty thousand persons were carried away captive," Ashoka had inscribed on a Rock Edict. "One hundred thousand were slain, and many times that number died." This victory took the Mauryan Empire eastward to the shores of the Bay of Bengal, and established Ashoka's sway for the next three decades. Yet the conquest was so bloody that it seems to have triggered something in Ashoka. He declared his remorse, and his life took a sharp swerve toward the embrace of ideas that were still comparatively fresh in India: the teachings of the **Buddha** (1).

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In Buddhist traditions across Asia, Ashoka is a revered figure, a world conqueror who became a world renouncer, a paragon for Buddhist rulers and regimes today. The stories of his conversion come from Buddhist legends, produced many centuries after his death, so a proselytizing agenda is inevitable. In preconversion days, he seemed like the vilest reprobate, the better

to show how Buddhism transformed him! It's Shakespeare's Prince Hal trick, but a good deal more gruesome.

There are legends about Ashoka in most major Asian languages: Sanskrit and Pali, but also Chinese, Japanese, Burmese, Tibetan, Thai, and Sinhala. Many of them tell of his furthering the faith by building eighty-four thousand stupas to house the Buddha's relics and to mark the eighty-four tenets of his teaching. So fervent was Ashoka's devotion that he gradually bankrupted the treasury, giving away everything to the Buddhist order of monks, the sangha, down to his last mango. Ashoka, once the lord of India, or Jambudvīpa, the "Land of Cherry Plums," ended up as lord of half a cherry plum. Such exemplary devotion led to the conquest of Buddhism over Asia.

Legends aside, in India, Ashoka used the faith to create an exceptional doctrine of rule, one that may have stemmed from regret over his youthful aggression, but was also a shrewd response to the empire he controlled. The Mauryan world was a hub with many connections. Ashoka's grandfather, Chandragupta, had links with classical Greece, and it is said that as a young man, Chandragupta met Alexander the Great. Chandragupta is thought to have followed the teachings of the Buddha's contemporary **Mahavira** (2), and to have become an adherent of the Jain faith, ending his life according to Jain teachings by slow, regulated starvation. Ashoka's father, Bindusara, wrote to King Antiochus I, ruler of a now-forgotten empire in what is present-day Turkey, asking for sweet wine, figs, and a Sophist philosopher.

These interconnections brought change to the Mauryan economy. The increase of wealth and the urbanization that characterized the Buddha's period accelerated, along with demands from lower orders for a greater share in society's privileges. Ashoka was governing a far more varied society than any previous Indian ruler. To maintain a grip over the vast spread and variety of his realm, a task for which force would never have been adequate, he needed a unifying worldview. What he created was his own extraordinary version of dhamma—infusing this concept, which the Buddha had borrowed and reinterpreted from Brahminic usage, with many of his own ideas.

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Ashoka's dhamma was, for both the sovereign and his society, a moral code of action by which he sought to rule, and one that he exhorted his subjects to follow. It focused on worldly deeds and was designed to dampen social conflicts. It spoke for tolerance and against zealotry and violence. It described a ruler's duty to interest himself in the health and happiness of his people. It

even committed him to planting banyan trees and mango groves along the roads, to provide water and resting places for travelers. And, although Ashoka was a follower of the Buddha, under his own dhamma he pledged to protect all his subjects, whatever their religious beliefs. It was a remarkable early statement of the distinction between the private faith of a leader and the responsibilities of public office.

While the Mauryan world was radically different from our own, the ideas Ashoka advocated are as arrestingly familiar as Kautilya's—though in happily different ways. He spoke of the need for moderation and impartiality, urging his subjects to leave behind “tendencies like jealousy, anger, cruelty, haste, stubbornness, laziness, and fatigue . . . The principle of all this is to avoid inconsistency and haste in the exercise of your functions.” Impartiality, consistency, deliberation—all solid liberal constitutional values, and it is remarkable to find a ruler who could connect them into an integrated vision so early in recorded history. Equally striking was Ashoka's articulation of the notion of moral progress—implicit in Buddhism, but which we tend to think of as a modern idea. As he states in Rock Edict IV: “Promulgation of dhamma has increased that which did not exist over many centuries: abstinence from killing, kindness to creatures, respect to relatives, respect for Brahmins and Shramanas, and obedience to mother, father and elders. This dhamma conduct has increased in diverse ways, and will increase more thanks to King Piyadassi, beloved of the gods.”

But perhaps Ashoka's most resonant statement is Rock Edict XII. It is a call for religious tolerance and civility in public life—or, as he puts it, “restraint in speech”:

... that is, not praising one's own religion or condemning the religion of others without good cause . . . Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought “Let me glorify my own religion” only harms his own religion. Therefore, contact between religions is good. One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadassi, desires that all should be well learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

“Restraint of speech” is a brilliant, if also potentially illiberal, formulation. It isn't the sort of inclusive political philosophy that a ruler could practice alone. To make sure his empire embraced dhamma, Ashoka addressed his people directly, going on *dhammayatas*, or “dhamma tours,” during which he preached

and held discussions. And it was in a surprisingly frank, gently cajoling voice, without the kingly bombast one might expect, that he ordered his scribes and stonemasons to chisel into great stones and pillars across the length and breadth of India, creating landscapes that resolved themselves into words and sentences. While most of the inscriptions are now lost to us, new ones are still being discovered—most recently at Ratanpurwa, in Bihar, in 2009.

In modern times, the idea of a country dominated by messages emanating from a single brain may evoke Orwell's Ministry of Truth or North Korea's ubiquitous billboards and tinny loudspeakers. Indeed, the Rock Edicts were not all tending toward the toasty liberal. One forbade unofficial gatherings—perhaps because those meetings could be used to criticize the king's heterodox ideas. Ashoka also created a special class of officials, *dhamma-mahamatas*, or “dhamma superintendents,” who were instructed to spread the word across the population—a creepy echo of Kautilya's roving armies of spies and mischief makers. Yet Ashoka's edicts said that true conquest was the conquest by piety and virtue, and that these ideas could not be enjoined by force:

Beloved-of-the-gods, King Piyadassi, speaks thus: This progress among the people through dhamma has been done by two means, by dhamma regulations and by persuasion. Of these, dhamma regulation is of little effect, while persuasion has much more effect. The dhamma regulations I have given are that various animals must be protected . . . But it is by persuasion that progress among the people through dhamma has had a greater effect in respect of harmlessness to living beings and the non-killing of living beings.

Ashoka did not always live up to his pronouncements, especially in his later years, when he seems to have become more religiously devout, even zealous. He ordered dissident monks to be expelled from Buddhist monasteries, he acknowledged the persistence of war, and he was aggressive in his treatment of forest dwellers who were challenging his rule. He became, in some of the later Buddhist portrayals that praise his fervor, a “monster of piety.”

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Ashoka died in 232 BCE. In the following decades, the Mauryan Empire went into decline. Eventually, Ashoka himself was largely forgotten in, or effaced from, the Indian imagination. The Prakrit language and Brahmi script fell into disuse, and no one knew how to read his edicts. For centuries, he seems

to have lived on mainly in Buddhist texts outside India—though some scholars now believe that, like the Buddha's, his challenge to Brahminical orthodoxy and his advocacy of ideas such as ahimsa (the protection of all living beings) provoked active rebuttals. Works such as the Hindu epic the Mahabharata, in which his name appears, might be seen as a response to Ashoka's particular brand of dhamma as much as to Buddhist ideas.

It was British gentleman scholars, the now-mocked Orientalists, who rediscovered Ashoka in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. **William Jones** (21) started the work, but it was his successor James Prinsep who deciphered the Brahmi script, becoming the first man in many centuries to comprehend the edicts. In the words of his fellow Ashokan explorer Alexander Cunningham, he lifted "the thick crust of oblivion" that had settled over the Mauryan world.

After the British rediscovered him, Ashoka went on to become an inspiration to India's nationalists. He was plucked out of the legends portraying him as a Buddhist ruler and incarnated in a new national myth as a historical Indian king who, with his unifying political will, stood above any single religion and embodied universal principles of justice and nonviolence. Here was an Indian ruler who could symbolize the ambitious agenda of cultural and religious pluralism that both Gandhi and Nehru believed necessary for India. Nehru's vision for the new nation did not expunge religion from public life, but recognized its value as a realm of vital individual choice and expression, which therefore required equal space for all faiths. It looked a lot like Ashoka's version of religious restraint.

Speaking in the Constituent Assembly in July 1947, just days before India was due to gain independence and as religious killings spread across the country, Nehru moved a resolution to adopt a design for a national flag, which had at its center another Ashokan symbol: the chakra, or wheel, part of the lion capital. "I am exceedingly happy," Nehru said, that "we have associated with this Flag of ours not only this emblem but in a sense the name of Ashoka, one of the most magnificent names not only in India's history but in world history. It is well that at this moment of strife, conflict and intolerance, our minds should go back toward what India stood for in the ancient days."

It's not clear whether the ideas of the ancient Mauryan can in fact offer a resource for India's continuing struggles to create a tolerant, secular state. Still, as Ashoka knew, symbols do matter. His four lions have become the currency—literally and metaphorically—of every Indian life. And his message, of moderation and restraint, remains in equal parts an admonition and an inspiration to Indians today.