

EMPEROR ASHOKA OF INDIA

WHAT MAKES A RULER LEGITIMATE?

A Unit of Study for Grades 7-12

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

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TEACHER'S BACKGROUND

I. UNIT OVERVIEW

During the age of agriculturally based empires, various conquerors from the western Mediterranean to East Asia brought large areas of populations under their own centralized authority. Gradually many of these conquerors came to realize that although military might was necessary to gain control over an area, sheer force of arms was not sufficient to govern effectively and ensure the loyalty and obedience of one's subjects. The Chinese would say: "You can win a kingdom from horseback, but you cannot rule from there." What strategies and policies besides raw force can leaders use to maintain their control and authority and ensure that people feel they have the right to rule and will obey their orders?

We will examine appeals for legitimacy, "the right to rule," based on such strategies as heredity, divinity, charisma, tolerance, law, and appeal to moral authority. After the rise of new religions such as Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, and later Christianity and Islam, would-be emperors and kings had available a rich storehouse of ethical and religious symbols on which to draw to try to establish a more popular base for absolute rule. Newly victorious kings applied religious principles to support claims that they were legitimate, resting their authority on a moral basis, not merely on the exercise of military power and fear.

A brief introduction will show how ancient rulers typically rested their authority on military force. Then we will examine that model of kingly authority to the Mauryan empire in India (322–185 B.C.E.). We will compare the first Mauryan ruler's appreciation of the Indian ideal of *artha*, meaning the "science of survival," with the attempt of the Emperor Ashoka (273–232 B.C.E.) to legitimate his government. We shall look at both the historic Ashoka's strategy for ruling a pluralistic society and the legendary Ashoka who emerged in the succeeding centuries. We will also explore ways that rulers in both Southeast and the Sui dynasty in China tried to emulate both the historic and legendary Ashoka to support their claims of legitimacy. (Note that in some books Ashoka is spelled "Asoka.")

II. UNIT CONTEXT

This unit focuses on the how rulers establish legitimacy, that is, make their subjects believe they have the right to rule. The historic period covered runs from Alexander of Macedonia's consolidation of his conquests (later fourth-century B.C.E.) to the rise of China's Sui Dynasty (581-618 C.E.), which appropriated Buddhist values and laid conditions for their adaptation in Korea and Japan. Establishing legitimacy is a challenge for any leader or government. Therefore, the concepts examined here are applicable to many periods of history, as well as to civics or government courses.

III. CORRELATION WITH THE NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR WORLD HISTORY

“Emperor Ashoka of India: What Makes a Ruler Legitimate?” provides teaching materials that address the *National Standards for History*, Basic Edition, (National Center for History in the Schools, UCLA, 1996), **World History, Era 3, Standard 2C** (Persian empire) and **2D** (Alexander of Macedonia); and **Standard 3C** (Unification of China) and **3D** (Mauryan empire). Also **Era 4, Standard 1D** (expansion of Hindu and Buddhist traditions), **3A** (Sui & Tang Dynasties), and **3B** (Chinese influence on Korea and Japan).

Because these lessons are organized around the thematic thread of political legitimization, teachers can use readings, activities, and insights from this unit as they examine examples of legitimization addressed in other sections of the National History Standards. The unit is also helpful in examining cultural diffusion and the spread of religious ideas.

IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the concept of political legitimacy, what makes people believe that the ruler has the right to rule, and that they should obey his or her commands.
2. To identify and understand some of the different bases of legitimacy such as power, heredity, the ballot, and moral force.
3. To identify and understand symbols of power such as a crown and other regalia.
4. To understand Ashoka's use of moral authority instead of military might as a basis for legitimacy.
5. To examine the meaning of the *stupa* and how it was associated with political power and legitimacy.
6. To investigate ways in which rulers in Southeast and East Asia adapted the Ashokan model as a source of legitimacy.

V. Lesson Plans

1. What Makes People Obey Rulers: The Question of Legitimacy
2. The Early Mauryan Empire's Basis of Rule and Legitimacy
3. Emperor Ashoka: Rule by *Dhamma*

4. The Legendary Ashoka
5. Ashoka's Influence Spreads to Southeast Asia and East Asia

VI. INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students in the class if they would obey you if you told them to:
 - Read a chapter in the textbook and take a quiz on the information.
 - Do the shopping for your family.
 - Take off their shirts or sweaters and let you listen to their heart.
 - Enlist in the army.
2. Discuss why they would or would not follow these orders. What orders from a teacher would they obey? What if a parent gave the orders? Who would they obey for each of those commands? Why?
3. Discuss what a teacher can do if a student refuses to obey. What can other persons in authority do to make people obey their commands?
4. Review historic examples students have studied of people obeying rulers such as Pericles, Moses, or Pharaoh. Why did they do so? What makes the American people willing to accept a new president and allow him to govern?
5. Review examples of people ignoring or disobeying the government. What were some historic examples of people revolting against rulers (e.g. Spartacus against Rome, the French against Louis XVI, British colonists against George III).
6. What happens when a large group of people refuse to accept the command or authority of a leader or a government?
7. Have the class brainstorm various reasons why people obey their rulers. That is, what are some of the things that make people think a ruler has legitimacy? Ask the class to make an hypothesis about effective ways leaders or rulers have to make sure people will obey them.
8. Introduce or review the idea of symbols and symbolic meaning. What would happen if you burned an American flag or a Christian cross? What would happen if you drew a swastika on the blackboard? What type of symbols might convince people in a pluralistic culture that their leaders have legitimacy? Ask students to brainstorm symbols of legitimacy, for example, uniforms people in authority wear or titles used to address important people.

LESSON TWO

THE EARLY MAURYAN EMPIRE'S BASIS OF RULE AND LEGITIMACY

A. OBJECTIVES

- ◆ To understand the concept of rule by physical force and realpolitik, and its relationship to political legitimacy.
- ◆ To examine strategies for survival and state-building used by the early leader of the Mauryan empire in India.
- ◆ To analyze strategies relatively weak states may use to survive.

B. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION

People of the region extending from the Mediterranean Sea to northern India had much experience with invaders and state-builders. Because of the absence of natural barriers such as mountains to protect them, the farming peoples of Mesopotamia were particularly vulnerable to invasion by nomadic bands from surrounding steppes and deserts. Babylonian, Assyrian, Chaldean, Hebrew, and Median conquerors all created power bases and established kingdoms in West Asia. In the sixth-century B.C.E. Cyrus, founder of the Achaemenid dynasty in Persia, united a mixture of peoples under an imperial system that at its height extended from Egypt to Afghanistan.

In the fourth century Alexander of Macedonia, whose father Philip II had founded a Greco-Macedonian kingdom, invaded West Asia and overthrew the Achaemenids. Alexander defeated Emperor Darius III in 330 B.C.E. and claimed the lands under Persian rule. He also adopted many of symbols and institutions of Persian kingship, including dress, manners, displays of royal regalia, and insistence that he be treated as a "god." Like both Cyrus and Darius, Alexander expected absolute and unquestioned obedience.

Crossing northern Persia and Afghanistan, Alexander invaded northern India in 326 B.C.E. and defeated the Indian king Porus. Because his exhausted soldiers were on the verge of mutiny, Alexander withdrew from India and returned to Mesopotamia, where he died in 323. Meanwhile, Chandragupta, the ruler of the Indian state of Magadha, took advantage of the Macedonia army's withdrawal to establish the Mauryan empire, which included most of the lands of the Indus and Ganges plains. The Mauryan state flourished from 322 to 185 B.C.E. *Megasthenes*, a Greek envoy to the Mauryan court, reported that Chandragupta, like his Greek-speaking contemporaries to the west, ruled primarily by force. He financed a professional army from the spoils of war and organized a network of roads and royal spies in order to move his troops quickly and to stay informed about all parts of his kingdom.

Chandragupta Maurya based much of his political philosophy and foreign policy on the *Arthashastra*, a treatise on government written by Kautilya, the king's chief advisor. Kautilya, a proponent of realpolitik government, hoped that his advice would make the Mauryan empire secure. According to the *Arthashastra*, relations among states follow the "Law of the Fishes:" big fish (empires) eat little fish (kingdoms). How, Kautilya examined, can a prince of a small kingdom keep from being "eaten up?" How can a big fish keep little fish from uniting and ganging up on him?

Kautilya's political map included twelve concentric circles of states. The state he served was in the center. All states that border the center state are automatically its enemies. But the states that border them on the outside become friends, because they are enemies of one's enemies. But if one's own state were to absorb the first ring of enemies, then the friends in the next ring become enemies. Enemies in the ring after that become friends. It follows that there are no lasting relationships among states, only temporary alliances. In this amoral world of fishes devouring one another, right action is whatever helps a ruler maintain his power. Continued legitimacy is based on the ability to stay on top of one's enemies. Kautilya's view of power relations could be expressed in the form of a *mandala* diagram. The Indian term *mandala* refers to a design based on geometric forms.

C. TEACHING ACTIVITIES

1. Share the **Historical Background Information** with the students as a lecture or a reading handout.

Discuss: What was the basis of Chandragupta's political authority? How did he aim to achieve and hold on to legitimacy? What probably made people in the empire obey him?

2. Have students examine the concentric circles of the Mandala strategy (**Student Handout 12**) as described by Kautilya. Applying the Mandala principle, discuss how contemporary nations might react to neighboring states. For example, consider Canada's view of the United States, France's view of Germany, India's view of Pakistan, or Russia's view of China. In the nuclear tests conducted by India and Pakistan in 1998, what principles of the *Arthashastra* were both nations and China following? Cite examples from history that illustrate this theory about the shifting nature of political friends and enemies, alliances, and wars.
3. Use **Student Handout 13** to establish the context and share the seven ways Kautilya used to greet a neighbor. Identify United States foreign policy goals and discuss how U.S. leaders might use the "Seven Ways" to achieve these goals. Watch the evening news or consult daily newspapers for applications of one or more of the "Seven Ways" in world or domestic politics.

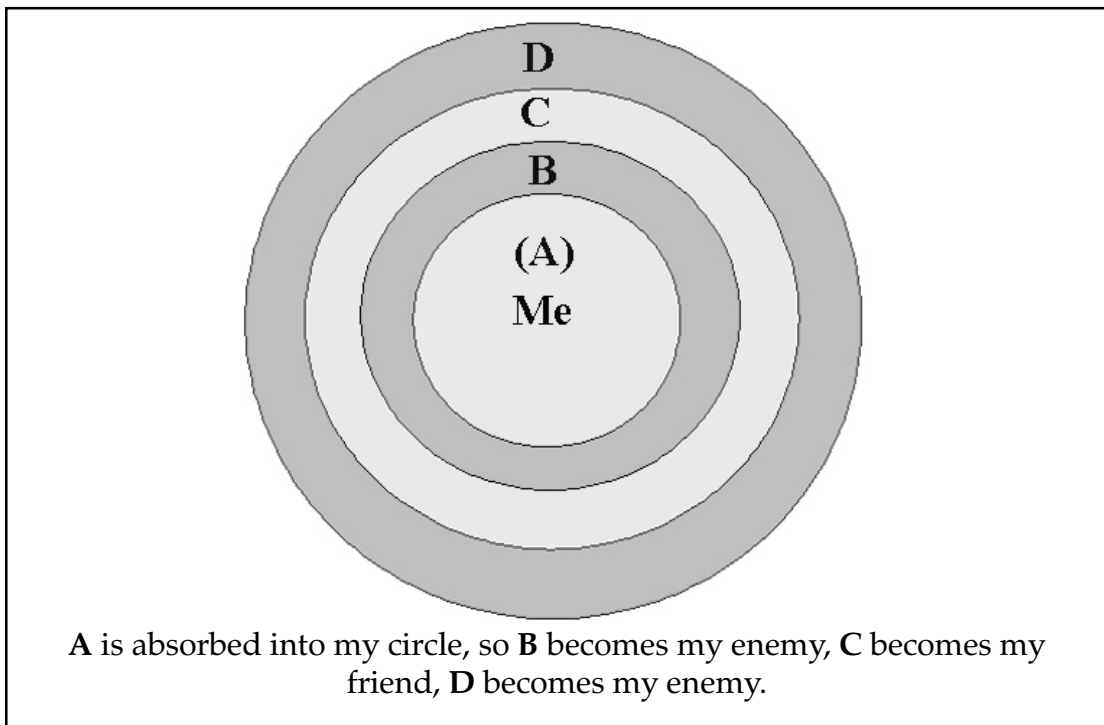
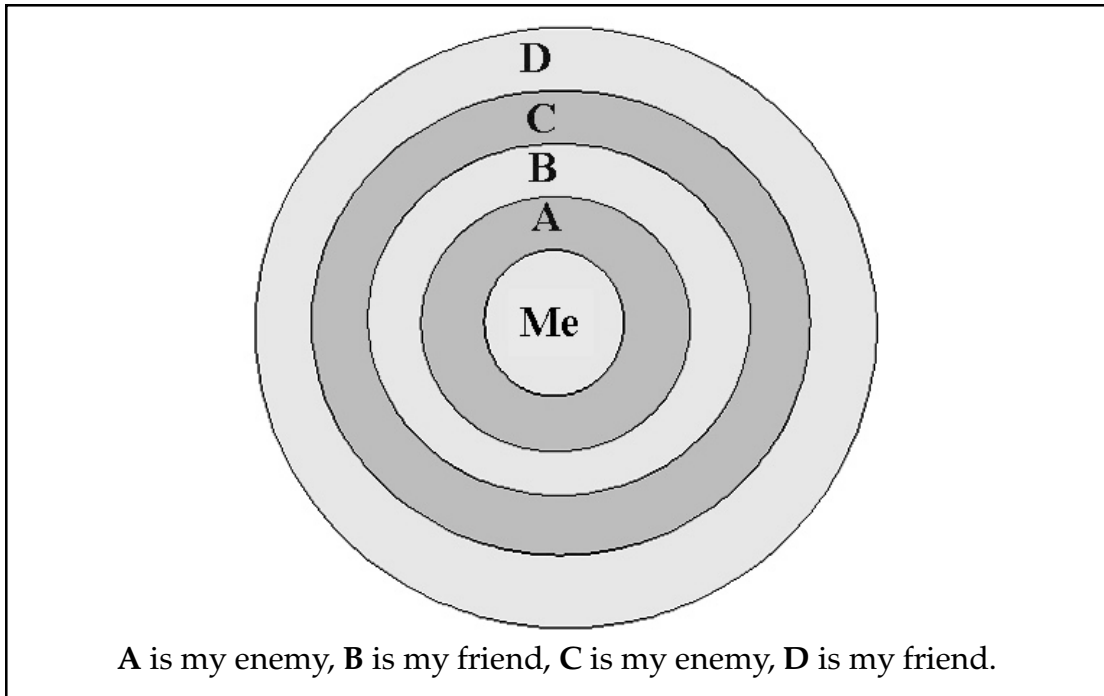
Discuss: How might you use the "seven ways" to get a teacher to change your grade or a parent to extend your curfew?

4. Artha is the science of survival and getting ahead in the world.

Discuss **Student Handout 14**:

How might you use Kautilya's advice to build your own career? How common are these amoral strategies in political and business dealings in the United States? If you pursued artha, what would your general attitude be toward other people? What are viable alternatives to artha if you want to get ahead in the world?

MANDALA DIAGRAM



KEY

- Enemy
- Friend

Illustration by Marian McKenna Olivas

SEVEN WAYS TO GREET A NEIGHBOR

Small states are almost always under threat from neighboring states in the “world of the fishes.” Small states must use various strategies in order to survive. Here are seven strategies that Kautilya recommended to Emperor Chandragupta Maurya in dealing with neighboring kingdoms:

Sarnan: Appeasement, sweet talk, soothing words, conciliatory conduct, such things as non-aggression pacts and treaties.

Danda: Exerting power, punishment, violence, being well-armed, carrying a big stick, aggression.

Dana: bribery or gift-giving, a donation, an agreement to share the spoils of war.

Bheda: Dividing the opposition so as to defeat them, splitting or causing a breach in the opposition, sow dissension in the enemy camp, using treachery or treason.

Maya: deceit, illusion, fraud, diplomatic deception (as when a Japanese mission went to Washington, DC in 1941 to offer peace when aircraft carriers were already on their way to Pearl Harbor).

Upeksha: taking no notice, over-looking or ignoring the enemy until you have decided on the proper course of action.

Indraiala: military maya, creating the appearance of power when you have none, feinting an assault in one direction and attacking in another.

ADVICE ON ARTHA

Advice on artha, or political power given in the Indian epic the Mahabharata, which was composed in Sanskrit between about 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E.

- ◆ The last word of social wisdom is never trust.
- ◆ As clouds change from moment to moment, just so thine enemy of today becomes, even today, they friend.
- ◆ Might is above right; right proceeds from might; right has its support in might, as living begins in the soil. As smoke the wind, so right must follow might. Right in itself is devoid of command; it leans on might as the creeper on the tree.
- ◆ Right is in the hands of the strong; nothing is impossible to the strong. Everything is pure that comes from the strong.
- ◆ When thou findest thyself in a low state, try to lift thyself up, resorting to pious as well as to cruel actions. Before practicing morality, wait until thou art strong.
- ◆ Be a heron in calculating thine own advantage, a lion when thou dost attack, a wolf when thou dost prey, a hare when thou takest flight.
- ◆ If thou art not prepared to be cruel and to kill men as the fisher kills the fish, abandon every hope of great success.