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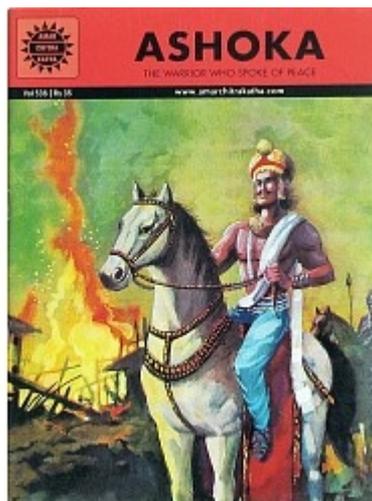
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Ashoka the Great
A Journey from Monarch to Monk

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India is a land of great spirituality - a land which has seen much spiritual upheaval; where mighty kings and emperors suddenly attained a realized state; gave up all the wealth, position and power they possessed; and followed the hallowed path to true freedom and liberation. Such is the story of Emperor Ashoka Maurya, popularly referred to as Ashoka the Great. In this post, we bring you the tale of that great ruler.

Introduction to Ashoka



Ashoka

Comic Book

Ashoka Maurya ruled almost the entire Indian subcontinent from c. 268 to 232 BCE. Rapidly rising to fame, he went on to become one of India's greatest ever emperors. His realm spanned the Hindu Kush mountains in Afghanistan, to present-day Bangladesh in the East. Barring small regions in present-day Tamil Nadu and Kerala, his rule spread over all of India. Pataliputra in Magadha (present-day Bihar) was his capital - he also maintained provincial capitals at Takshashila and Ujjaini.

In 260 BCE, King Ashoka waged a great war against Kalinga (present-day Odisha) and won the same. All his ancestors had failed at their previous attempts to conquer this region. The war brought on much destruction, which saddened him. He started looking for inner peace and

finally embraced Buddhism. He later dedicated his entire life for the propagation of Buddhism, eventually coming to be known as one of the greatest ever philanthropists that the motherland gave birth to.

Birth and Early Life

Ashoka Maurya was born to the Emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, Bindusara and his wife Dharma or Dhamma. He was the grandson of the mighty Chandragupta Maurya, who was the founder of the entire dynasty.

Certain other texts make a mention of Empress Subhadrangi as his mother. She was supposedly the daughter of a Brahmin and came from the city of Champa. Hailing from the exalted Ajivika sect, she was deemed to be the best choice for Emperor Bindusara. Legend has it that, after marriage, she was kept away from her husband for a long time. However, that period eventually ended and they had a son. So overjoyed was she that she gushed, "Now I am without sorrow". That is how Ashoka is believed to have gotten his name. Ashoka literally means, "the one without sorrow".

Ashoka had many older siblings, all of who were his half-brothers from his father's other wives. Right from a very young age, he showed an interest in the martial arts and warfare. He went on to receive royal military training. He was very good at hunting as well and was believed to have killed a lion with just a wooden rod.

Ashoka Starts to Wield Power

Once Ashoka was old enough to understand royal matters, he started a revolt to curb the activities of corrupt ministers. Acharya Chanakya, Bindusara's chief advisor, raided several towns and declared himself the ruler of all those territories. Ashoka was then made the governor of Ujjayini.

After Bindusara's demise in 272 BCE, there was a war over who would succeed the throne. The King had wanted his son Susima to ascend the throne. However, the court ministers thought he was too arrogant and not efficient enough to wield power. Hence, they encouraged Ashoka to assume the position of King. A minister called Radhagupta played a central role in Ashoka's rapid rise to power.

Ashoka tricked Susima into entering a pit filled with hot coals, thereby eliminating him altogether. He then proceeded to kill 99 of his other brothers, sparing only one, named Vitashoka. He also told Radhagupta that he would appoint him as the prime minister. He then ascended the throne and was officially crowned as Emperor in 269 BCE.

Ashoka as Emperor

Ashoka was believed to be an ill-tempered and haughty by nature. He created Ashoka's Hell, an elaborate torture chamber, built especially to persecute and kill the prisoners kept there. This behavior earned him the name of Chanda Ashoka, of the "Fierce Ashoka".

Over the next eight years, Ashoka waged many a war against territories, major and minor. By the end of that period, his reign stretched from Assam in the East to Balochistan in the West; from the Pamir Knot in Afghanistan in the North to the peninsula in South India. Only Tamil Nadu and Kerala were left out - these areas were ruled by the three great Tamil dynasties, namely, the Cholas, the Cheras and the Pandyas.

The Kalinga War

The Kalinga War was fought between Ashoka and his Mauryan Empire, and Raja Anantha Padmanabhan from the state of Kalinga. This region was a feudal republic, situated along the coast of present-day Odisha and North Coastal Andhra Pradesh. This war, which Ashoka waged 8 years after his coronation, was the only major one after ascending the throne.

Kalinga was a beautiful and prosperous region, consisting of peaceful, intrinsically artistic and skilled people. The land was rich and abundant with natural resources and business too flourished in this area, called "Utkala". The people living there followed a uniform civil code as well. The Mauryan Empire, on the other hand, followed a policy of territorial expansion.

Kalinga had been under the control of Magadha during the rule of Nanda, but it regained its sovereignty right at the start of the Maurya rule. The Mauryas considered the loss of this territory as the loss of political prestige, and hence, determined to reclaim the land as early as they possibly could. In fact, this was one of the central reasons why Ashoka waged the battle against that region.

Kalinga, being a strong territory, gave formidable resistance to Ashoka and his army. Ashoka too fought bravely, till the very end. Finally, the former were outnumbered against Ashoka's army and they had to surrender to him.

The terrible war ended in great bloodshed and claimed too many lives. Over 150,000 Kalinga warriors and 100,000 warriors from Ashoka's side were killed in this savage battle. It is said that, in the wake of the war, the Daya River at Bhubaneswar, which was situated just next to the battlefield, turned red with the warriors' blood. Thousands of men, women and children were deported after that - several children had been orphaned and many people had lost their near and dear ones. The once-beautiful land had been completely devastated.

Ashoka Converts to Buddhism

Seeing all the destruction caused by the Kalinga War and feeling extreme remorse that he had

been the main cause for it, Ashoka wanted to get away from it all. Legend has it that the great King roamed the city the day after the battle was over. Seeing the amount of houses that were burnt down and the corpses lying around everywhere, he realized the actual extent of damage he had given rise to. He decided to lead a peaceful life from then on and adopted Buddhism as a way of life. He however retained his control over Kalinga.

The mighty Emperor now transformed himself into a peaceful ruler and got completely involved in studying Buddhism and its doctrines. Some texts argue that he never actually converted to Buddhism and say that the ancient texts were only trying to unnecessarily glorify Ashoka. Nevertheless, it is an indisputable fact that Ashoka's active propagation of Buddhism, both within his own Empire and across the rest of India, gradually led to the worldwide expansion of the philosophy, from around 250 BCE.

It is worth mentioning at this time, that Ashoka's son Mahinda (Mahendra) and daughter Sanghamitra were responsible for the spread of Buddhism all across Sri Lanka.

Ashoka as Administrator

Though Ashoka had a strong army and powerful soldiers and warriors, he decided to maintain friendly ties with all other regions, post his conversion to Buddhism. He contributed towards establishing peace and well-being among his subjects, also organizing medical and other facilities in his own kingdom as well as in neighboring kingdoms. Not only that; he got more trees planted, wells dug and roads repaired, for the benefit of the common people.

Further, he prohibited royal hunting, animal slaughter and beef eating, additionally imposing restrictions on fishing, fish-eating and meat eating.

Ashoka the Great Breathes His Last

Ashoka then went on to rule for 4 decades. As the story goes; after his demise, his body was burned for seven days and nights. Post his death, the Mauryan Empire lasted only about 5 more decades, within which time it had spread its rule almost all over the Indian subcontinent.

Ashoka had many wives and children. However, most of them did not feature in a big way in history. Incidentally, his main consort, Asandhimitra, bore him no children. His youngest wife, Tishyaraksha, was a wily woman and plotted to get his son, Kunala, blind. He was named as the next heir to the throne and she disliked the idea. Unfortunately, she succeeded in her efforts. Kunala finally left the palace, to become a wandering singer. He was accompanied by his favorite wife, Kanchanmala.

In Pataliputra, Ashoka heard Kunala sing and then heard of the fate that had befallen the young man. He immediately condemned Tishyaraksha to death and then restored Kunala's position in the court. According to some texts, Kunala, who was a keen practitioner of

Buddhism, forgave Tishyaraksha and asks his father to do the same. But Ashoka could not do so and saw to it that she was executed. Kunala was later succeeded by his son, Samprati, who ruled for 5 decades.

The Legacy of Ashoka Maurya

The legacy of Ashoka was retained in an unusual manner. Though there were no written records of his reign, it had all been registered in the form of sculpted pillars and rocks, on which were inscribed his deeds, actions and teachings. The language used during the time was Prakrit, written in Brahmi script. This language is more ancient than Sanskrit.

Fifty years after Ashoka's demise, the last ruler of the Maurya Empire, Brihadratha, was assassinated by his own army commander-in-chief, Pushyamitra Shunga. The latter then founded the Shunga dynasty and ruled over a fraction of the Mauryan Empire. Many of the northwestern territories, which were under the Mauryan rule, went on to become part of the Indo-Greek Kingdom.

Ashoka's Contribution to Buddhism



Buddhist Monastery

Photographic Print

Ashoka the Great made an immense contribution to the propagation of Buddhism in India and in many places across Asia in general. He created a unique model of Buddhist "kingship", wherein he sought the approval and support not only of his subjects, but also of the Buddhist sangha as well. During his tenure as ruler, he built several monasteries and stupas and wholeheartedly supported the ordination of monks within his kingdom. Several rulers followed this model in the years ahead, thereby carrying forward that tradition set by him.

Further, Ashoka chose to call conclaves in order to settle a variety of disputes, during the course of his reign. This eventually led to a close association between the royalty and the religious hierarchy, within the state. This is still evident in many Southeast Asian countries, especially like in Thailand, where the Thai King acts as both secular ruler as well as a religious

head of state.

According to some experts, Emperor Ashoka was always particular about respecting all religions and Gurus; and maintaining harmonious relationships, be they between parents and children, teachers and their pupils, employers and employees and so on. He focused on Ahimsa (non-violence), freedom of following chosen faith and secularism.

Ironically, though, Ashoka had not completely adopted non-violence, even after going deep into Buddhism. In one instance, a non-Buddhist once drew a picture of the Buddha bowing at the feet of Mahavira, the 24th Jain Tirthankaras. When a Buddhist follower complained about this to Ashoka, the latter ordered to arrest him, also to kill him and all the other Ajivikas in that region. As a result of this, over 18,000 Ajivikas were killed one by one.

A while later; another Nirgrantha (Jain monk) drew a similar picture in Pataliputra. Ashoka burnt him and his whole family alive. He additionally announced a reward for anyone who brought him the head of another Nirgrantha. By a tragic twist of fate, his own brother was mistaken for a Nirgrantha and was killed. These instances do raise a question about the actual nature of the state - we do not know if this indicated an actual lack of secularism or if it merely was anti-propaganda by other rival sects.

Propagator of Buddhism Globally

Ashoka was mainly responsible for bringing Buddhism to the rest of the world. Being a staunch Buddhist himself, he wanted everyone to benefit from the philosophy. He built several stupas, Sangharama, chaityas and viharas; as also a number of living quarters for Buddhist monks, spanning Southeast Asia and Central Asia. He ordered the construction of some 84,000 stupas to place all the relics. He generously donated to the mathas and viharas as well. Places such as Nalanda and Takshashila housed the most number of viharas. The Emperor then went on to order the construction of the famous Sanchi stupa and also the Mahabodhi Temple.

He sent his son and daughter, Mahindra and Sanghamitra, to spread the philosophy in Sri Lanka. He also asked the leading Buddhist monks to travel to Kashmir, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, China, Mongolia, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Greece, Italy and Turkey and so on, in order to take Buddhism to those regions as well. Some other monks were sent to Maharashtra and South India too, so that the entire country could be covered. Not stopping at that, Ashoka invited Buddhists and non-Buddhist scholars and religious heads to hold conferences on religion.

While urged the Buddhist monks to create sacred texts and treatises on Buddhism, he encouraged non-Buddhists as well, reserving a fair amount of donation for them too. Hence, though he was mainly interested in propagating Buddhism, he gave equal importance to the flowering of other schools of thought and cultures as well. By and by, his name spread far and

wide, as did Buddhism itself.

The Ashoka Chakra, the Ashokstambha and the Ashokmudra

The Ashoka Chakra

The Ashoka Chakra or the Wheel of Ashoka was created by Ashoka during his rule. The word "Chakra" implies a "cycle" or a "self-repeating process". It signifies the movement of time or life and how the entire world changes with time.

The Ashoka Chakra is basically an embodiment of the Dharmachakra (the Wheel of Dharma). This Wheel has 24 spokes, each representing the 12 Laws of Dependent Origination and the 12 Laws of Dependent Termination. This symbol of Ashoka has been found inscribed in several Mauryan relics, the most prominent ones being the Lion Capital of Sarnath and on the Ashoka Pillar.

In the present day, the most-used representation of this Ashoka Chakra is at the center of our Indian Flag. Adopted as a National Symbol on 22 July, 1947, this is rendered in navy-blue color, on a white background. It also represents the symbol of the Charkha or the Spinning Wheel, in the pre-independence version of the flag.

The Ashoka Chakra is also seen at the base of Lion Capital of Ashoka, which has also been adopted as the National Emblem of India.



Ashoka Stambha
Wooden Sculpture

The Ashokstambha

The Ashokstambha or the Pillar of Ashoka, built by Ashoka during his reign, is actually a series of columns, constructed at several places all over North India. At present, only ten of these pillars of Ashoka survive, along with their inscriptions. About 40-50 feet in height each,

weighing about 50 tons each, all of these pillars were quarried at Chunar and dragged hundreds of miles to the places they were finally erected in.

The very first Ashokstambha was discovered by Thomas Coryat in the 16th Century, nestling among the ruins of ancient Delhi. The wheel symbolizes the sun time and Buddhist law, while the Swastika represents the cosmic movement around a fixed center, guarding against evil and protecting the good.

The Ashokmudra

The Ashokmudra or the Lion Capital is a sculpture of 4 Indian/Asian lions standing back to back. It is mounted on an abacus, with a fresco carrying it in high relief of an elephant, a horse, a bull and a lion; separated by intervening chariot-wheels over an inverted bell-shaped lotus. Sculpted out of a single block of highly polished sandstone, this impressive creation was believed to be crowned by the Ashoka Chakra.

Originally placed atop the Ashokstambha at Sarnath, it is sometimes also referred to as the Ashoka Column. Though the sculpture is still in its original place, the Lion Capital is now in the Sarnath Museum. As mentioned earlier, the Ashokmudra has been adopted as the National Emblem of India.

The pillar at Sarnath bears one of the Edicts of Ashoka. The 4 animals shown in this structure represent the different steps of Lord Buddha's life, as follows:

- The Elephant symbolizes the dream that Queen Maya had, of Buddha's birth - she had seen a vision of a white elephant entering her womb.
- The Bull stands for the desire Buddha felt in his mind, when he was a young prince.
- The Galloping Horse embodies Buddha's departure from his princely life.
- The Lion represents the Buddha's accomplishments and finally, his enlightenment.
- The four lions sometimes also represent Ashoka's rule over the four directions. The wheel, on the other hand, stand for his enlightened rule. The four animals symbolize the four adjoining territories of India.

Historical Sources

As mentioned earlier, there are not too many records about Emperor Ashoka and his life and times. In fact, he was almost forgotten by Indian historians during the British rule. However, experts such as James Prinsep, John Hubert Marshall, Sir Alexander Cunningham and Mortimer Wheeler, to mention a few, were mainly responsible for reviving his story and relating it to the rest of the world.

In Asia, the story of Ashoka the Great predominantly comes from Buddhist sources. The Ashokavadana is a treatise, written in the 2nd Century, in Sanskrit. Two Pali chronicles of Sri

Lanka, the Dwipavamsa and the Mahavamsa, also narrate several incidents from Ashoka's life. Apart from the above, the Edicts of Ashoka give some detailed information about this great emperor.

Let us now study these in detail:

- Ashokavadana: This is a work authored in the 2nd Century CE. Originally in Sanskrit, it was later also translated into Chinese by Fa Hien. Basically aiming to delve into the relationship between the ruler and his community of monks, it deals with telling the common man how he should go about living the ideal life, based on following the tenets as laid down by his religion. The most important thing about this text is that it does not support the idea that Ashoka converted to Buddhism after the Kalinga war - the war is not even mentioned here. It, however, does mention that he used his power and position to spread Buddhism and was ready to adopt just about any means to achieve his goal.

- Dwipavamsa: Also referred to as Dipavamsa, this treatise bears the oldest historical record of Sri Lanka. This is believed to have been compiled around the 3rd or 4th Century CE. King Dhatusena is believed to have ordered that this text be recited at the annual Mahinda festival held at Anuradhapura.

- Mahavamsa: This is actually a poem penned in the Pali language, by one of the Sri Lankan kings. Relating tales from the period between the tenure of King Vijaya of Kalinga in 543 BCE to the rule of King Mahasena (334-361 BCE), it gives some important information about Ashoka's times, including his consecration.

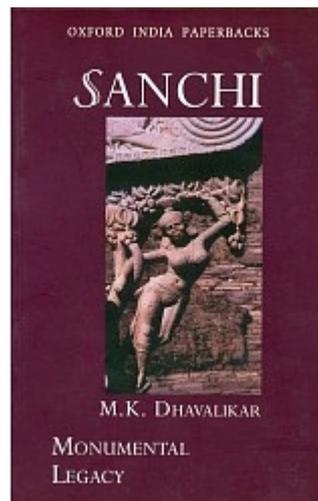
- Edicts of Ashoka: These are a collection of 33 inscriptions that were done on Ashokstambas, as well as on cave walls and boulders, made by Ashoka himself, when he was king. Found scattered throughout India and some parts of Pakistan, they reveal evidence about the presence of Buddhism at that time. Also speaking about its moral and religious precepts, they relate how the philosophy spread under the propagation of Ashoka the Great.

In these Edicts, it is clearly indicated that Ashoka supported not only Buddhism, but all other religions as well, including Hinduism, Jainism and Ajivikaism. However, it does indicate his strong leaning toward Buddhism. In one instance, he refers to himself as an "upasaka" or practitioner and in another; he reveals his high level of familiarity with Buddhist texts.

Edifices Relating to Ashoka

One can find several edifices and structures relating to Ashoka. Prominent among them is the Sanchi Stupa

The Sanchi Stupa



Sanchi - Monumental Legacy

Book

The Great Sanchi Stupa is a Buddhist vihara at Sanchi, which is situated at Sanchi Town in the Raisen District of Madhya Pradesh. This stupa is the oldest stone structure in India and was originally ordered to be built by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd Century BCE. This work was supervised by Ashoka's wife, whose birthplace was Sanchi. They were married at this venue as well. The construction basically comprises a simple hemisphere made from brick - this is built over the relics of the Buddha. Crowned by the chatra, a parasol-like creation, it aimed to honor and protect the relics.

The Stupa has several Brahmi inscriptions, mostly mentioning donations and such other matters. The inscriptions come from the time of the Maurya, Shunga, Kushana and Gupta dynasties and indicate that a number of these donations came from Vidisha, Ujjain, Kurara, Nadinagar, Kurghara, Bhogavadhan and a few other regions.

Other structures relating to Ashoka are as follows:

- Dhamek Stupa, Sarnath
- Mahabodhi Temple, Bihar
- Barabar Caves, Bihar
- Nalanda Mahavira, Bihar
- Takshashila (or Taxila), Pakistan
- Bhir Mound, Pakistan
- Bharhut Stupa, Madhya Pradesh
- Deokothar Stupa, Pakistan
- Sannati Stupa, Karnataka
- Mir Rukun, Pakistan

Ashoka in Art and Literature

The legend of Ashoka the Great features in many paintings, poems, plays, songs, films and books of India.

- Ashok Kumar is a 1941 Tamil film, narrating the life of the emperor.
- The verse-play, Uttar-Priyadarshi, has been staged several times all over the world.
- The famous and much-loved Amar Chitra Katha released a graphic novel, presenting the story of Emperor Ashoka.
- Coming to Bollywood, the 2001 Shahrukh Khan starrer, Asoka, talks about the ruler's life and times.
- In 2002, Mason Jennings released his new song, "Emperor Ashoka".
- In 2015, an Indian television serial called Chakravartin Ashok Samrat, started airing on the Colors Channel.
- "The Legend of Kunal" is an upcoming film, which will bring us the story of Kunala, the son of Ashoka.

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