





Ashoka (reigned 273-232 B.C.), the third emperor of the Maurya dynasty, is considered ancient India's greatest ruler. He combined the piety of a saint with the practical qualities of a king, and in the history of Buddhism he ranks second only to Buddha...



 In the history of the world there have been thousands of kings and emperors who called themselves 'their highnesses,' 'their majesties, and their exalted majesties' and so on. They shone tor a brief moment, and as quickly disappeared. But Ashoka shines and shines brightly like a bright star, even unto this day.



 Ashoka was the son of the Mauryan Emperor Bindusara by a relatively lower ranked queen named Dharma. Dharma was said to be the daughter of a poor Brahmin who introduced her into the harem of the Emperor as it was predicted that her son would be a great ruler. Although Dharma was of priestly lineage, the fact that she was not royal by birth made her a very low-status consort in the harem.

 Asoka had several elder half-brothers and just one younger sibling, Vitthashoka, another son of Dharma. The princes were extremely competitive, but as a youngster young Asoka is said to have excelled in the military and academic disciplines in which the boys were tutored. There was said to be significant sibling rivalry, especially between Asoka and his brother Susima, both as warriors and as administrators.

 According to Buddhist tradition, described in the 2nd century "Legend of Asoka", the birth of Asoka was foretold by Buddha, in the story of "The Gift of Dust":



Map of the Maurya Empire under Ashoka's rule.

Developing into an impeccable warrior general and a shrewd statesman, Ashoka went on to command several regiments of the Mauryan army. His growing popularity across the empire made his elder brothers wary of his chances of being favoured by Bindusara to become the next emperor. The eldest of them, Prince Susima, the traditional heir to the throne, persuaded Bindusara to send Ashoka to quell an uprising in the city of Takshashila in the north-west province of Sindh, of which Prince Susima was the governor. Takshashila was a highly volatile place because of the war-like Indo-Greek population and mismanagement by Susima himself. This had led to the formation of different militias causing unrest. Ashoka complied and left for the troubled area. As news of Ashoka's visit with his army trickled in, he was welcomed by the revolting militias and the uprising ended without a fight. (The province revolted once more during the rule of Ashoka, but this time the uprising was crushed with an iron fist).

Ashoka's success made his halfbrothers more wary of his intentions of becoming the emperor, and more incitements from Susima led Bindusara to send Ashoka into exile. He went into Kalinga and stayed incognito there. There he met a fisherwoman named Kaurwaki, with whom he fell in love; recently found inscriptions indicate that she went on to become his second or third queen.

 Meanwhile, there again was a violent uprising in Ujjain. Emperor Bindusara summoned Ashoka back after an exile of two years. Ashoka went into Ujjain and in the ensuing battle was injured, but his generals quelled the uprising. Ashoka was treated in hiding so that loyalists in Susima's camp could not harm him. He was treated by Buddhist monks and nuns. This is where he first learned the teachings of the Buddha, and it is also where he met the beautiful Devi, who was his personal nurse and the daughter of a merchant from adjacent Vidisha. After recovering, he married her. Ashoka, at this time, was already married to Asandhimitra who was to be his much-loved chief queen for many years until her death. She seems to havé stayed on in Pataliputra all her life.

 The following year passed quite peacefully for him and Devi was about to deliver his first child. In the meantime, Emperor Bindusura took ill and was on his death-bed. A clique of ministers led by Radhagupt, who hated Susima, summoned Ashoka to take the crown, though Bindusara preferred Susima. As the Buddhist lore goes, in a fit of rage Prince Ashoka attacked Pataliputra (modern day Patna), and killed all his brothers, including Susima, and threw their bodies into a well in Pataliputra. It is not known if Bindusara was already dead at this time. At that stage of his life, many called him Chand Ashoka meaning murderer and heartless Ashoka. The Buddhist legends paint a gory picture of his sadistic activities at this time. Most are legendary, and must be read as supporting background to highlight the transformation in Ashoka which Buddhism brought about later.

 Ascending the throne, Ashoka expanded his empire over the next eight years: it grew to encompass an area extending from the present-day boundaries of Bangladesh and the Indian state of Assam, in the east, to the territory of present-day Iran and Afghanistan, in the west, and from the Pamir Knots in the north almost to the peninsular tip of southern India. At that stage of his life, he was called Chakravarti which literally translates to "he for whom the wheel of law turns" (broadly meaning the emperor). Around this time, his Buddhist queen Devi gave birth to two children, Prince Mahindra and Princess Sanghamitra.

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 The early part of Ashoka's reign was apparently quite bloodthirsty. Ashoka was constantly on the war campaign, conquering territory after territory and significantly expanding the already large Mauryan empire and adding to his wealth. His last conquest was the state of Kalinga on the east coast of India in the present-day state of Orissa. Kalinga prided itself on its sovereignty and democracy; with its monarchicalparliamentary democracy, it was quite an exception in ancient Bharata, as there existed the concept of Rajdharma, meaning the duty of the rulers, which was intrinsically entwined with the concept of bravery and Kshatriya dharma.

· The pretext for the start of the Kalinga War (265 BC or 263 BC) is uncertain. One of Ashoka's brothers and probably a supporter of Susima might have fled to Kalinga and found official refuge there. This enraged Ashoka immensely. He was advised by his ministers to attack Kalinga for this act of treachery. Ashoka then asked Kalinga's royalty to submit before his supremacy. When they defied this diktat, Ashoka sent one of his generals to Kalinga to make them submit.

· The general and his forces were, however, completely routed through the skilled tactics of Kalinga's commander-in-chief. Ashoka, baffled by this defeat, attacked with the greatest invasion ever recorded in Indian history until then. Kalinga put up a stiff resistance, but they were no match for Ashoka's powerful armies, superior weapons and experienced generals and soldiers. The whole of Kalinga was plundered and destroyed; Ashoka's later edicts say that about 100,000 people were killed on the Kalinga side and 10,000 from Ashoka's army; thousands of men and women were deported.



 According to legend, one day after the war was over Ashoka ventured out to roam the eastern city and all he could see were burnt houses and scattered corpses. This sight made him sick and he cried the famous quotation, "What have I done?" Upon his return to Paliputra, he could get no sleep and was constantly haunted by his deeds in Kalinga. The brutality of the conquest led him to adopt Buddhism under the guidance of the Brahmin Buddhist sages Radhaswami and Manjushri and he used his position to propagate the relatively new philosophy to new heights, as far as ancient Rome and Egypt. When the war against Kalinga ended, Asoka's warriors had killed over 100,000 people. He was filled with sorrow. He gave up war and violence, thus becoming almost the exact opposite of his grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya. He freed his prisoners and gave them back their land. He declared in his edicts:

 Legend has it that there was another factor that lead Ashoka to Buddhism. A Mauryan princess who had been married to one of Ashoka's brothers (who Ashoka executed) fled her palace with a maid, fearing for her unborn child. After much travel, the pregnant princess collapsed under a tree in the forest, and the maid ran to a nearby ashram to fetch a priest or physician to help. Meanwhile, under the tree, the princess gave birth to a son. The young prince was brought up by the Brahmins of the ashram and educated by them. Later, when he was around thirteen years old, he caught the eye of Ashoka, who was surprised to see such a young boy dressed as a sage. When the boy calmly revealed who he was, it seemed that Ashoka was moved by guilt and compassion, and moved the boy and his mother into the palace.

 Meanwhile Queen Devi, who was a Buddhist, had brought up her children in that faith, and apparently left Ashoka after she saw the horrors of Kalinga. Ashoka was grieved by this, and was counselled by his nephew (who had been raised in the ashram and was more priest than prince) to embrace his dharma and draw away from war. Prince Mahindra and Princess Sanghamitra, the children of Queen Devi, abhorred violence and bloodshed, but knew that as royals war would be a part of their lives. They therefore asked Ashoka for permission to join the Buddhist Sangha, which Ashoka reluctantly granted. The two siblings established Buddhism in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka).

Coins



- From that point Ashoka, who had been described as "the cruel Ashoka" (Chandashoka), started to be described as "the pious Ashoka" (Dharmashoka). He propagated the Vibhajjavada school of Buddhism and preached it within his domain and worldwide from about 250 BC. Emperor Ashoka undoubtedly has to be credited with the first serious attempt to develop a Buddhist policy.
- Silver punch-mark coins of the **Mauryan empire**, bear Buddhist symbols such as the Dharmacakra, the elephant (previous form of the Buddha), the tree under which enlightenment happened, and the burial mound where the Buddha died (obverse). 3rd century BC.

Thank You

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