

Ashoka



"All men are my children. I am like a father to them. As every father desires the good and the happiness of his children, I wish that all men should be happy always."

These are the words of an emperor who lived two thousand and three hundred years ago.

This emperor was Ashoka (also called 'Devanampriya Priyadarshi'). The wheel in the abacus of the pillar which he erected as a memorial at Saranath now adorns the national flag of free India.

The rock inscription of Devanampriya Priyadarshi were being discovered all over India for centuries. But for a long time the identity of this 'Devanampriya Priyadarshi' remained a puzzle.

One day in the year 1915 near a village called Maski in Raichur District of Karnataka, a rock inscription was discovered on a hill. In this inscription for the first time the name of Ashoka was found with titles like Devanampriya and Priyadarshi. It was then certain that Devanampriya Priyadarshi was no other than Ashoka.

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The Mauryan Emperor, whose name shone like a very bright star in the history of the world, and whom the world honors and loves even two thousand years after his death.

Ashoka was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya. Chandragupta was the first ruler of the Mauryan Empire. He ruled for about twenty four years, and then, seeking peace of mind, handed over the reigns of his empire to his son, Bindusara. This Bindusara was the father of Ashoka.

Subhadrangi was the mother of Ashoka. She was the daughter of a poor man of Champakanagar.

As a boy Ashoka was not only active also mischievous. He was a skilful hunter. From the time of Chandragupta Maurya the hunting expedition of the Emperor and the royal family was a splendid sight.

Ashoka was not handsome. But no prince excelled him in valour, courage, dignity, love of adventure and ability in administration. Therefore even as a prince Ashoka was loved and respected by his subjects and by his ministers. Bindusara discovered the ability of his son quite early and, when Ashoka was still young, appointed him Governor of Avanti.

Ujjain was the capital of Avanti. It was a beautiful city, and the home of knowledge, wealth and art. Within a few days of taking over the administration of Avanti, Ashoka became an excellent statesman. It was when he was in this city he married Shakya Kumari, the beautiful daughter of a merchant of Vidishanagar. She gave birth to two children, Mahendra and Sanghamitra.

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Ashoka's valour, courage and wisdom were soon tested. The citizens of Taxila rose in revolt against the rule of Magadha. Bindusara's eldest son, Susheema could not put down the rebellion. Bindusara sent Ashoka to suppress the revolt. Ashoka did not have enough forces but yet moved towards the city boldly.

A surprising thing happened. The citizens of Taxila never thought of fighting against Ashoka. They gave him a grand welcome.

They pleaded, "We do not hate either Bindusara or the royal family. The wicked ministers are responsible for our revolt. We misunderstood you because of their evil advice. We are not rebels. Please forgive us."

Ashoka understood the real situation and punished those responsible for the revolt. He stayed there for some days and gave the people some advice in simple and beautiful words. When complete peace had been established in the city, Ashoka returned to his province.

Days and years passed.

Bindusara grew old. His body became weak. His health declined.

Among his ministers one minister by name Radhagupta was prominent. He and the others began to think about the future welfare of the empire.

Bindusara's eldest son was Susheema. According to custom he should have succeeded to the throne.

But the revolt of Taxila had exposed his weakness.

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Besides, he had begun to behave with insolence.

The council of ministers felt that the empire would suffer and lose peace and prosperity and that there would be no justice in the land if Susheema was crowned king. Therefore they sent word to Ashoka that his father was ill and that he should rush to the bed side of his sick father.

Emperor Bindusara had won the title 'Amitraghatha' (one who strikes those who are unfriendly). He had annexed the area between the east coast and the west coast in south India and extended his empire. He ruled over this empire for twenty-five years and died in 272 B.C. Ashoka who had come to Pataliputra from Ujjain at the request of Radhagupta, the Chief Minister, was crowned king of Magadha after the death of his father.

What happened after this is not very clear. Perhaps Susheema heard the news of his father's death and feared that Ashoka might be crowned King; he probably came from Taxila with a large army. He came prepared to fight if necessary. But he was killed even as he was attempting to gain an entrance to the city.

There is a story that Ashoka had all his brothers killed for the sake of the kingdom. There is no historical basis for this story. Ashoka has spoken affectionately about his brothers in his rock inscriptions.

The fifth day of the third month Jyestamasa of the year 268 B.C. was the auspicious day on which Ashoka was crowned king. Pataliputra was gaily decorated.

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The auspicious time fixed for the coronation arrived. Auspicious music sounded. Young and radiant Ashoka entered the court, surrounded by his bodyguards. The heir to the throne of Magadha bowed to the throne and ascended it. As the priests chanted sacred verses, the heir was adorned with the appropriate symbols of royalty and the crown was placed on his head. The citizens of Pataliputra rejoiced that the empire was blessed with an able ruler.

Ashoka was a very intelligent statesman. He ruled over Magadha wisely and ably. The council of ministers and officers of state were obedient, dutiful and able. Therefore peace and plenty brightened the land.

Happiness makes man forget how time passes.

Eight years passed without anyone realizing it.

Ashoka became the lord of a vast empire. But Kalinga, a small state (now called Orissa), remained independent, beyond Ashoka's empire.

Kalinga was a rich and fertile land between the Godavari and the Manhandi. The people of Kalinga were patriots and loved freedom. They were ready to fight and die in defense of their motherland.

During Ashoka's grandfather's time the Kalinga army had only 60,000 infantry, 1,000 cavalry and 700 elephants. During Bindusara's reign and at the beginning of Ashoka's reign Kalinga must have improved its armed forces considerably.

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The mighty Magadha army marched towards Kalinga. Ashoka himself went at the head of his vast army.

The Kalinga army resisted the Magadha army and fought bravely. They were not afraid even of death. But their valor and sacrifices were in vain and finally it accepted defeat.

Ashoka won a glorious victory.

'What Have I done!

True, Ashoka was victorious and Kalinga was his.

What was the price of this victory?

Ashoka who led the army saw the battlefield with his own eyes.

As far as his eye could see he saw only the corpses of elephants and horses, and the limbs of soldiers killed in the battle. There were streams of blood. Soldiers were rolling on the ground in unbearable pain. There were orphaned children. And eagles flew about to feast on the dead bodies.

Not one or two but hundreds of terrible sights greeted Ashoka's eyes. His heart was broken with grief and shame.

He felt unhappy over the victory, which he had won at the cost of so much suffering. 'What a dreadful deed have I done? I was the head of a vast empire, but I longed to subjugate a small kingdom and caused the death of thousands of soldiers; I widowed thousands of women and orphaned thousands of children. With these oppressive thoughts in his minds he could not stay there any longer. He led his army back towards Pataliputra with a heavy heart.

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Ashoka became the lord of Kalinga as he had wished. But the victory brought him not joy but grief. The sights of grim slaughter he had seen dimmed the pride of victory. Whether Ashoka was resting, sleeping or awake, the scenes of agony and death he had seen on the battlefield haunted him at all times; he could not have peace of mind even for a moment.

Ashoka understood that the flames of war not only burn and destroy on the battlefield but spread to other fields and destroy many innocent lives.

The suffering caused by war does not end on the battlefield; it continues to poison the minds and lives of the survivors for a long time. At this time Ashoka was at the height of his power; he was the head of a vast empire; he had no equal in wealth or armed strength. And yet the Kalinga war, which was his first war, also became his last war! The power of arms bowed before the power of Dharma (righteousness).

Ashoka swore that he would never again take to arms and that he would never again commit such a crime against humanity. And it proved to be the oath of a man of iron would.

In the history of the world, many kings have sworn not to fight again, after they had been defeated.

But how many kings have been moved by pity in the hour of victory and laid down arms?

Perhaps there has been only one such king in the history of the whole world-Ashoka.

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'The victory of Dharma brings with it love and affection. Devanampriya believes that, however small may be the love gained by its victory, it brings ample reward in the other world.'

This is what Ashoka has said in one of his inscriptions.

The teaching of Buddha brought peace to Ashoka who was haunted by memories of the agony he had seen in Kalinga.

Buddha's message of nonviolence, kindness and love of mankind appealed to the unhappy Ashoka. A disciple of Buddha, Upagupta initiated him into Buddhism. From that day Ashoka's heart became the home of compassion, right living, love and nonviolence. He gave up hunting and eating meat. He put an end to the killing of animals for the royal kitchen. Realizing that it was not enough if he lived a righteous life, he proclaimed that all his subjects also should live a life of righteousness.

'Of all victories, the victory of Dharma is the noblest. One may win a piece of land by fighting a war. But by kindness, love and pity one can win the hearts of people. The sharp point of the sword spills blood; but from Dharma springs the fountain of love. The victory won by arms brings fleeting joy but the victory of Dharma brings lasting joy'-Ashoka realized this truth. So he taught his subjects this lesson:

'All people should live a life of truthfulness, justice and love. Respect your parents. Treat your teachers and relatives with affection. Be modest in their presence. Give charity. Do not be unkind to animals. No one should think that he end his religion are the greatest. All religions preach the same virtues. Just as it is bad to

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indulge in self-praise and slandering others, it is bad to condemn other religions. Respect for other religions brings glory to one's own religion.'

Ashoka did not think of the good of only his subjects; he thought of the good of all mankind'. He wished to win the hearts of people and to serve the world through religion and through goodwill and good action. He decided to dedicate his energy and all his powers and wealth to this goal.

The first thing that Ashoka did to spread righteousness among his people was to undertake a pilgrimage. It took place two years after the Kalinga war. His pilgrimage started with his visit to Sambodhi, the holy place where Gauthama, the Buddha breathed his last. He visited other holy places during the pilgrimage. Ashoka has explained in his own words the purpose of his pilgrimage. 'To meet Brahmins and Shramanas and to give gifts to them. To meet the elders and to honor them with gifts of gold. To meet people and to preach the law of Dharma and to discuss Dharma.' These were the important objects.

Ashoka was not content with visiting holy places. He believed that the message of Dharma should not become stagnant like standing water. He wanted it to spread within India and outside, too. He wanted the people of the world to bathe in its pure steam and purify themselves. Therefore he undertook a great task which would be enduring. He got the laws of Dharma engraved on rocks and stone pillars both inside and outside the country. These inscriptions related to Dharma, social ethics and moral living. Ashoka

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himself has proclaimed that his desire was that his message should reach the people of all lands and enable them to follow and propagate the Dharma for the welfare of the world. Such inscriptions can be seen even today both in India and outside. In India they have been discovered in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and at Siddapura of Chitradurga District, Koppala and Maski in Raichur District of Karnataka. Outside India they have been found in Peshawar District in Pakistan as well as near Khadabar in Afghanistan and on the borders of Nepal.

We read in history about many kings who put up inscriptions about their invasions, charities, donations and the extension of their territories. But it is only Ashoka who got inscriptions carved on rocks and pillars, which lead people from untruth to truth, from death to immortality and from darkness to light. To this day they are like lights of wisdom. The laws of Dharma are like the seeds of virtue sown in the hearts of the people. They are steps leading to salvation.

In order to foster greater understanding regarding Dharma, Ashoka took a bold and firm step. He wished to show that all religions teach the same path of virtue. In one of his inscriptions Ashoka says, 'We must respect the followers of other religions in every way. By doing so we can help the growth of our religion and we can help other religions also. If we act in a different way it will harm our religion and also other religions. The man who wants his religion to spread rapidly and honors only his religion and speaks ill of other religions will harm the interests of his own religion. The power of all religions should

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grow. Devanampriya does not consider charity and worship more important than this.' He appointed officers called 'Dharma - Mahamatras' in order to spread these ideas among the people. These officers met people of different religions and lived among them; they helped to remove the mistaken ideas they had about other religions and to know what was good in them. Often the money set apart for religious purposes was spent otherwise. Sometimes though it seems to have been spent for religious purpose, selfish people pocket it. It was the duty of the Dharma - Mahamatras to see that the money meant for religious purposes was spent properly. They toured the empire and visited the courts of justice also. They set right the errors in the conduct of affairs and in the awards of punishments. Such officers do not seem to have been appointed anywhere else in the history of the world. Besides these, other officers also toured the empire once in five years according to the orders of the emperor and spread the Dharma among the people.

After seventeen years of Ashoka's rule, unfortunately difference of opinion arose among the Buddhist monks and there was a split. There were many lazy and bad monks given to evil ways. These willful sanyasins were a curse to Buddhism. Buddhism was, therefore, losing its power. Ashoka felt unhappy over this. In order to save Buddhism for total eclipse and to increase its influence, Ashoka threw out many lazy monks from the Buddhist fold. He invited the worthy and the serious - minded monks to Ashokarama in Pataliputra for a conference. Moggaliputra Tishya presided over the conference attended by the Buddhist monks from the Four Corners of the

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country. Ashoka sat with the great teaches and sent for each Bhikshu and asked him, "What did Lord Buddha teach?" He discussed many things with them. After long discussions what Lord Buddha had taught came out clearly and unambiguously.

Buddhism gained a new strength from this conference. Ashoka unlike other kings did not send his armies to foreign lands to conquer them. He who declared that the victory of Dharma was the real victory, he sent Buddhist monks to other lands to spread the light he had received from Buddhism. He sent Buddhist preachers to Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Burma and Kashmir. To Ceylon (Srilanka) he sent his own children Mahendra and Sanghamitra. As a result of this, Buddhism spread to all countries in East Asia.

In the twentieth year of his reign, Ashoka undertook his second pilgrimage with his daughter and Upagupta. This we learn from his inscriptions. During this pilgrimage he visited the ruins of Vaishali and the places where Buddha used to rest. From Vaishali Ashoka traveled east and came to Ramagrama. He visited the stupa at Ramagrama built by a king who had collected and preserved the sacred bones of Buddha after his death. Later he also visited Lumbini, Kapilavastu, Shravanti, Gaya and other holy places. Wherever he went he caused pillars and stupas to be erected in memory of his visit. They remind us even today of the visit of Ashoka to those holy places.

There is one such memorial pillar at Sarnath. On the top of a stone pillar about fifty feet high there are beautifully carved figures of four standing lions. The figures of the lions are now to be seen in the

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official emblem of the government of free India, and the Ashoka Chakra adorns the national flag of India. In this way the government of India has paid a deserving tribute to the ideal king, Ashoka. But unfortunately the pillar at Sarnath is broken and mutilated. So we can see only fragments of the pillar. Of the eighty-four thousand stoopas said to have been built by Ashoka, the stupa at Sanchi is both famous and splendid. To this day this fifty-four feet stupa stands on a high pedestal and forms a semicircle. Besides these stoopas and pillars, Ashoka built cave dwellings, rest houses and Buddha Viharas in large numbers. They not only proclaim Ashoka's teachings but also are examples of the splendid architecture of those days.

There have been many emperors in the history of India but few that ruled over such a vast empire as Ashoka's. His empire extended over a large part of India and Afghanistan and Beluchistan beyond the Northwest province and Nepal in the North, as well as the Bengal, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and a large part of Karnataka of today. The inscriptions discovered in these parts prove this.

Though Pataliputra was the capital of the vast empire, for the proper administration of his empire, Ashoka divided his empire into four provinces. Malava, Punjab, Dakshinapatha and Kalinga. Ujjain was the capital of Punjab, Taxila of Malava, Suvarnagiri of Dakshinapatha and Kosala of Kalinga. He appointed a representative in each province. The representatives were chosen for their ability and not on the basis of birth or high connections. They enjoyed considerable freedom in the administration of their provinces.

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To assist the emperor there was a council of Ministers in the capital. If the emperor wanted to make changes, he used to consult the Ministers. After the council examined the pros and cons of a proposal it was implemented. Usually the emperor accepted the decision of the council of ministers.

Chanakya (Kautilya), the Chief Minister of Chandragupta Maurya, has described the daily life of the kings of that age as follows:

'The king gets up at 3 a.m. And till half past four examines various matters relating to the empire and takes decisions. He then receives the blessings of teachers and priests. Then he meets his doctors and the officials of the kitchen. He then goes to the court hall and considers from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. the revenue and the expenditure of the previous day. From 7.30 he grants interviews to persons who have come to meet the emperor on urgent matters, and examines their submissions. He retires to bathe at 9. After bath, prayer and breakfast, the emperor meets officers of the empire at 10.30 a.m. and issues instructions on many matters. At noon he meets the council of ministers and discusses matters of state. After rest between 1.30 and 3 p.m. he inspects the various divisions of the army. After this he receives reports from messengers and spies who have come from different parts of his empire and from other kingdom.'

Ashoka, who continued the ideal and the tradition of his grandfather Chandragupta, practiced in letter and spirit, the routine set down by Chanakya. Besides, Ashoka believed that the prosperity of his subjects was his prosperity; so he had appointed officers to

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report to him on the welfare and sufferings of the people. They were to report to him no matter what the hour was. His own order best shows his concern for the people:

"Whether I am dining or in my private apartments, asleep or engaged in some work, setting out on a journey or resting; wherever I may be and whatever the time of the day or night the officers must come and report to me about the people and their affairs. Wherever I may be I shall think about the welfare of the people and work for them." These words are enough to show Ashoka's devotion to the welfare of his people.

Ashoka defeated Kalinga in war, hadn't he? He then appointed officers to administer the kingdom. How do officers who go from the victorious state to the defeated land usually behave towards the people? They lose all sense of justice and fair play and behave proudly. They insult the defeated people. Ashoka did not want this to happen. He desired that the people of Kalinga should live in peace and honor. This was his order to the officers who were sent to Kalinga:

"I have put you in charge of thousands of people. Earn the love and affection of all those people. Whatever situation may arise treat all people alike. Be impartial in your actions. Give up rudeness, haste, laziness, and lack of interest and short temper. Nothing can be achieved if we are bored and idle. Therefore be active. If you understand how sacred your work is and behave with a sense of responsibility, you will go to heaven, and you will also repay your debt to the king who appointed you." Ashoka who treated his subjects as

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his children, further said, "Like a mother who gives her child to an able nurse, trusting that she would bring up the baby well. I have entrusted my subjects to your care."

Ashoka worked hard especially for the spread of education in his land. Nalanda is famous in history; it was the center of education and the University of Magadha. It is said that university of Magadha was established by Ashoka. Students of that university were very much respected. During his time trade with foreign countries was carried on by sea routes. He encouraged agriculture, trade and industries. There were canals to help irrigation. All the money paid into the Government treasury was spent for the welfare of the people.

Ashoka has big roads laid to help the growth of business and industries. For the benefit of travelers he had trees planted on both sides of the roads. Wells were dug and guest houses and rest houses were put up. There was free medical aid both for men and for animals. Ashoka is among the first in the world who built hospitals for the treatment of animals. He got medicinal plants and a variety of fruit-bearing trees from several places and planted them where they were not found. In one inscription he has expressed the wish that even the forest dwellers in his empire should live happily.

Sandalwood wears itself out to give a cool and fragrant paste to men. Sugarcane gives up its sweet juice to men and reduces itself to mere skin in the process. The candle burns itself out that others may have light. All his life Ashoka lived like the sandalwood, like the sugarcane, like the candle.

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He worked hard without rest and taught the people to live a life of truthfulness, Dharma, Justice and morality. There was happiness and peace. There were social gatherings at which people of all castes and creeds gathered and enjoyed themselves without feeling of high and low.

Ashoka who was the embodiment of pity, kindness and love unfortunately had to suffer much in his old age. The reason was this- his sons, Mahendra, Kunala and Teevala were engaged in spreading Buddhism and so his grandsons Dasharatha and Samprati started quarrelling over the right of succession to the throne. Even the queens quarreled over the issue. There was one among them, Tishyarakshite who was a wicked woman. Ashoka was a monk among kings and had given up all pomp and pleasures and lived a very simple life. This did not please Tishyarakshite who loved the life of ease and comfort. All this made Ashoka sad. By this time he had grown old. Not much is known about the last ten years of his life and about his death. Some say, 'The emperor got disgusted in life and therefore he went on a pilgrimage as a Buddhist monk with his teacher, for the peace of his mind. At last he reached Taxila and stayed there. Ashoka, the beloved of Gods and men, left the earth at the age of seventy-two.'

However it is clear that Ashoka was unhappy in his old age.

The Brightest Star in the history of the world

For thirty-seven years Ashoka ruled over a vast realm as an able emperor, a skilled lawgiver, a hero who knew no defeat, a monk

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among the kings, a noble preacher of Dharma and as a friend of his subjects. He is unique in the history of mankind.

Ashoka has called himself 'Devanampriya' and 'Priyadarshi' in his inscriptions. 'Devanampriya' means the beloved of the Gods and 'Priyadarshi' means one whose appearance brings joy. These names are appropriate to Ashoka's nature. The Gods cannot but love a man of such virtues. There was no one to check him, no one to punish him if he did wrong. But he became his own teacher and checked his desires. He dedicated his life to the happiness and welfare of his people; it is no wonder that his subjects rejoiced when they saw him.

Some historians say that Ashoka followed the teachings of Buddhism so devotedly that he himself became a Buddhist monk. Though he was the emperor he probably stayed in the Viharas often. When he stayed in Viharas he must have fasted like the monk very strictly and must have rigidly observed religious practices. During his stay there he learnt the teachings of Buddha in great detail.

Ashoka passed away from this world two thousand years ago, but his empire of truthfulness, Dharma, nonviolence, compassion and love of subjects has remained an ideal for the world to this day. This empire is deathless. Therefore H.G.Wells, an English historian, has said, "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 for a brief moment and disappeared. But Ashoka shines and shines brightly like a bright star even today." This praise is fully merited.

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