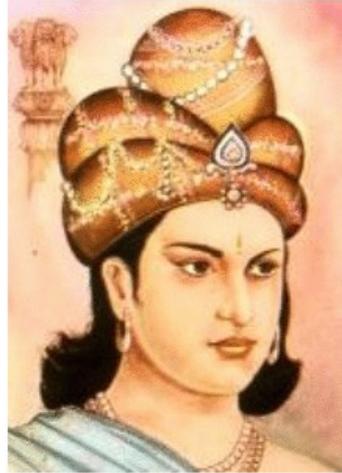




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Ashoka



Emperor 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. 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. The Mauryan Emperor, whose name shone like a very bright star in the history of the world, and whom the world honors 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. No prince excelled Ashoka 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. Ashoka's valour, courage and wisdom were soon tested. The citizens of Taxila (Takshashila) rose in revolt against the rule of Magadha. Bindusara's eldest son, Susheema (also called 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.

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.

In the year 268 B.C. Ashoka was crowned the king of Magadha. He 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. 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 Mahanadi. The people of Kalinga were patriots and loved freedom. They were ready to fight and die in defense of their motherland.

The Kalinga war - transformation

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. Every thinner and finally it accepted defeat. Ashoka won a glorious victory. What was the price of this victory?

One of Ashoka's own inscriptions describes it:

'One and a half people were taken prisoners. A lake was killed during the battle. Many more died as a result of the war.'

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

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heavy heart. Ashoka became the lord of Kalinga but he 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.

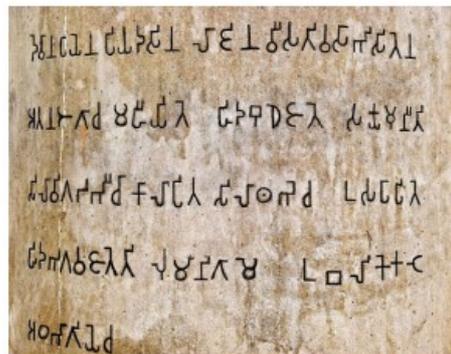
The **teachings of Buddha** brought peace to Ashoka who was haunted by memories of the agony he had seen in Kalinga. Buddha's message of nonviolence, kindness and love of mankind appealed to the unhappy Ashoka. A disciple of Buddha, Upagupta initiated him into Buddhism. From that day Ashoka's heart became 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.



Sanchi Stupa

'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 the end of his religion are the greatest. All religions preach the same virtues. Just as it is bad to 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.'



Ashokan Pillar Inscription in Brahmi at Lumbini

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 good will and good action. He decided to dedicate his energy and all his powers and wealth to this goal.

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 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 in 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.

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 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. 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.

Renowned British author and social critic **H. G. Wells** in his bestselling two-volume work, *The Outline of History* (1920), wrote of emperor Ashoka:

"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 as quickly disappeared. But Ashoka shines and shines brightly like a bright star, even unto this day."



The lion capital of Ashoka



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