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The Myth of Ashoka

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ABSTRACT

Ashoka is one of the most famous Indian Emperors. In this research paper, the researcher tries to analyse the character of Ashoka, as created and shaped by the modern mainstream media and compare the same with the historical Ashoka. The researcher has taken up three hypotheses, to be proved. Through the first hypothesis, the researcher tries to prove how Ashoka, in reality, was not as he is portrayed today and that Ashoka, even after promoting religious tolerance, engaged in violence in the name of religion. Through the second hypothesis, the researcher tries to prove the propaganda that Ashoka created regarding him and the propaganda that has been created since after him. Ashoka greatly cared about his image among his subjects and he left no stones unturned to create an image of a peaceful, discipline and moral King. In the third hypothesis, the researcher tries to debunk the myth of Ashoka's conversion and tries to prove that the popular narrative as to how Ashoka experienced a sudden change of heart after the Kalinga War is false and that Ashoka was actually a Buddhist since before the war and the fact that whether he was a Buddhist prior to the War or after the War, would have had no effect on his decision to start the Kalinga War.

Keywords: Ashoka, Kalinga, Buddhism, Peace, Myth.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Amidst tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, the name of Ashoka shines and shines alone, a star”

- **H G Wells**

Ashoka is widely regarded as one of the greatest leaders in World history, ruling over a vast empire which encompassed most of the Indian subcontinent. It is said that Ashoka was an able conqueror, a commoner's advocate, a vigorous patron and follower of Buddhism and above all, a beacon of hope. He is considered to be someone who set an example that even the worst of us is capable of change for as the popular narrative goes, Ashoka was once a vicious and a terrible man, predisposed to violence but after the Kalinga war, he gazed upon the dead and repented and therefore, embracing peace and goodwill for all mankind. Today, more than two thousand years after his death, Ashoka's legacy is alive and well. His Lion Pillar serves as the official

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emblem of India and his “Dhamma Chakra” appears on the flag but a deeper analysis of history shows that Ashoka’s legacy is actually being whitewashed for the historical records reveal a more nuanced figure that of a deeply troubled authoritarian whose successes may have been limited. This research paper tries to analyse as to whether Ashoka was really as great as is told by the popular narrative being churned about Ashoka’s character. Ashoka’s edicts mention a great deal of information about him and his orders. The most popular narrative that comes from Ashoka’s story(which is found in the Edicts) that Ashoka gazed upon the dead and had a ultimate change of heart which resulted into him converting to Buddhism. This research paper tries to analyse as to how this popular myth, is actually just a myth similar to many other stories and narratives about Ashoka.

(A) Research questions

This research aims to find answers to the following questions-

1. Was Ashoka really a morally good king?
2. What was the propaganda of Ashoka that he spread during his time period?
3. Is the story of Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism after the Kaling war, a myth or a truth?

(B) Research objectives

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To prove that Ashoka was not a morally good King, as he is portrayed to be.
2. To prove that Ashoka cared about his image in the Empire and actively engaged in churning a propaganda which portrayed him in a good light.
3. To prove that Ashoka was actually a Buddhist since before the war and that whether Ashoka was a Buddhist prior to the war or after that, would have no consequence on his decision to initiate the Kalinga war.

(C) Hypothesis

This research aims to prove the following hypotheses:

1. Ashoka was not a morally good king.
2. Ashoka actively engaged in spreading a false propaganda about himself.
3. Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism after the Kalinga war, is just a myth.

(D) Review of literature

- 1) Thapar Romila, *Ashoka and the decline of the Mauryas*, 1973.

Romila Thapar in this research paper has written in detail about the rise and fall of the Mauryan Empire. She has particularly focused, while mentioning the Mauryan Empire, on Ashoka. Her research has been cited in this research paper in order to know the life and times of the historical Ashoka.

- 2) Guruge, Ananda WP, *Emperor Asoka and Buddhism: Some Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist Tradition and Asokan Inscriptions*, 1986.

Anand W.P. Guruge, in his research paper, has given a detailed account of the historical Ashoka. He has given evidence which proves many of the common and existing notions about Ashoka to be false. His research has been cited in order to know the discrepancies and issue regarding the popular narrative about Ashoka and to explain the true character of Ashoka.

- 3) Dhammika, Ven S., *The Edicts of King Asoka*, 1993.

Ven. S. Dhammika, in his translations, has given a very detailed translation of the Ashokan inscriptions. He has quoted various sources and has also given the translations of the minor edicts of Ashoka. This work has been cited in order to gain an in-depth knowledge about Ashoka's inscriptions and what they wanted to convey in context of the syntactical form of the Prakrit language.

(E) Research methodology

In order to collect information and perform research for this research paper, secondary sources of data have been taken into consideration such as of- research papers, data from relevant government sources, and literary works inclusive of books by renowned writers. A qualitative analysis of the available material has been made in order to analyse data from multiple resources in a flexible and open ended manner however, a personal interpretation of the data collected has also been made. Deductive reasoning method has been taken into consideration in order to advance a supposition for the said topic and to derive at an appropriate reasoning from the stated facts relevant to the topic.

II. FINDINGS

Was ashoka really a morally good king?

Ashoka is much celebrated today and considered to be the hallmark of how a good and moral emperor should be but his actions say otherwise. Ashoka was a follower of Buddhism but his actions were contrary to the principle laid down by Gautama Buddha (Romila, 1960) (Tashi, 2005). The Asokavadana gives us an account of the atrocities committed by Ashoka, on the Jains (Strong, 1983). Once during Ashoka's reign, a Jain drew an offensive picture of Gautama

Buddha, bowing down to Mahavira. When Ashoka came to know about this, he forced the Jain and his entire family to enter their house and then had the house burnt down to the ground (Strong, 1983). Following this incident, he also mentioned that whosoever, brought him the head of a Jain, would be rewarded with one dinara (Strong, 1983). This led to the killings of the Jains and Jain monks in the kingdom. How this bloodshed ended, is a great example of Karma. Around the time when Ashoka made this announcement in his kingdom, his biological brother-Vitasoka, decided to take shelter in the house of a cowherd. The cowherd, thinking that Vitasoka was a Jain monk, cut his head and presented it to Ashoka (Strong, 1983). Ashoka, realising his mistake and seeing his brother dead, put a stop to the killings (Strong, 1983). This, however, was not the only instance when something such as this occurred. In the city of Pundavardhana, a lay Jain follower, drew a similar picture of Gautama Buddha (Strong, 1983). A Buddhist devotee reported the same to Ashoka. Ashoka, furious after hearing this, ordered for the killing of all Ajivikas in the entirety of Pundavardhana (Strong, 1983). As a result of this order, eighteen thousand Ajivikas were put to death. All of this reveals that even after being a Buddhist, Ashoka broke the very principles of non-violence, on which Buddhism stands. Another instance of Ashoka's not-so-moral behaviour was his hypocrisy that he expressed through his own edicts. In his thirteenth Rock Edict (Dhammika, 2000), Ashoka mentions that he feels guilty for the violence that resulted out of the Kalinga war and that he intends to repent by following the principle of "Dhamma" of Buddhism. However, in the very same edict, he mentions that he was willing and ready to do the tribals, the very same thing that he did to the people of Kalinga (Dhammika, 2000). This is ironic, considering the fact that he talks about non-violence and repentance in the very same edict. Ashoka's cruelty can also be seen in another instance, wherein he burned the women of his harem, just because of the fact that they called him "ugly" (Thapar, 1961). This led to Ashoka getting known as "Chandashoka" (Thapar, 1961), for his deeds. It has also been found that Ashoka created a special facility for torturing and executing prisoners. This special facility came to be known as "Ashoka's Hell" (Thapar, 1961). It is said that Ashoka hired a psychopathic royal executioner, a man named, "Girika" and that Ashoka would visit the facility for hours, at a time, in order to watch the prisoners being tortured (Thapar, 1961). Another account states that Ashoka, tortured the very same Buddhist Bhikkhu, who was responsible for converting him to Buddhism at the later stages of his life (Thapar, 1961). The Mauryan Empire, among other things, is also famous for its practice of Slavery (Sharma, 1978). Although, Megasthenes has mentioned in his records that slavery was not practiced in India during the time of the Mauryas (Stoneman, 2021) but Megasthenes only took into consideration the concept and practice of slavery that was followed during the

Greek Period (Vlassoupoulos, 2011). Since, he was not able to find in India, the same kind of slavery that was practiced in Greece, he thought that slavery did not exist during the times of the Mauryan period. The Arthashastra, written by Kautilya, talks about slavery and supports the institution (Trautmann, 2012). Kautilya's laws on slavery indicated that slavery had become very rigid and tough during that time and that there were a large number of slaves during that period (Sharma, 1978). If Ashoka truly believed in doing good and spreading good, what was the reason which stopped him from declaring the slaves, free from the bondage of their masters? And if not the masters then what stopped Ashoka from releasing the slaves that he personally owned, as a Emperor? Ashoka mentions in his fifteenth Rock Edict that he considers all men to be his children (Dhammika, 2000). Which Father would be happy, knowing that his own children are "slaves"? This is just another instance of Ashoka's ignorance



to others' suffering. Lastly, how Ashoka came into power and became an Emperor, is another story of violence. Ashoka was never the first choice for succeeding the prior Mauryan Emperor, Bindusara. Bindusara's eldest son, Sushima, was meant to succeed his father (Seneviratne, 1978). However, after the death of Bindusara, there was a struggle for succession between Ashoka and his brothers (Thapar, 1961). Ashoka was said to be so brutal that he killed all of his

brothers, only sparing his own biological brother,"Vitasoka" (Thapar, 1961). Even though the struggle for succession was not something which is exclusive only to the story of Ashoka but the fact that he spared his own biological brother itself stands a testimony to the fact that Ashoka was not of a moral character. If he wanted to wipe out all rivals to his power, he might as well should have killed his own biological brother. However, he decided to spare Vitasoka and kill all his half-brothers, reflecting the fact that his enmity for his brothers extended beyond the struggle for his succession, and possibly would have been because of the fact that Ashoka's mother was not from a higher caste (Thapar, 1961), a factor which he would have considered, to be a deterrence in his succession. All of this points to the fact that Ashoka is not the same as he has been portrayed and that there is a difference between the Ashoka that most of the Indians have been conditioned to believe in and the historical Ashoka, who is contradictory to marketed version of Ashoka.

III. ASHOKA'S PROPAGANDA

There is much conflict regarding the caste of Ashoka's mother. Some sources describe her to be a daughter of a Brahmin, who was kept away from the palace and finally when she gained access to Emperor Bindusara, she bore him two sons (Ashoka and Vitasoka) (Thapar, 1961). This however seems to be a manipulation of truth. Ashoka's mother was likely a common citizen and not even a Brahmin. This greatly deterred Ashoka's chances to claim succession. This is a great example of how historical records can be manipulated to suit the popular narrative. This is one of the examples which explains how Ashoka's story has been manipulated and told in a fashion which portrays him to be born to a high-caste mother and hence, justifies his succession. When Ashoka became the Emperor, he took the title of Priyadarshi, which means, "he who is beautiful to look at" (Vashisth, 2017). This title taken by Ashoka and mentioned in his edicts (Dhammika, 2000), reveals the propaganda that he spread during his time. Ashoka was suffering from "von Recklinghausen disease"* (Wig & Sharma, 2015), which did not make him appealing to look at. It is also said that Ashoka's father (Emperor Bindusara), considered Ashoka to be unfit to rule, only because of his appearance (Khanna, 2019). This was also considered by Ashoka to be something which deterred him from getting the throne and hence, when he became Emperor, he took upon the title of "Priyadarshi". In fact, Ashoka himself mentions about his propaganda, in one of his own edicts. The 14th Rock Edict of Ashoka mentions that when two Rock Edicts are inconsistent with each other, then it would be for the political concerns (Dhammika, 2000). This is one of the main reasons why, interestingly, none of the Rock Edicts of Ashoka present in Kalinga, reveal the disastrous consequences of the Kalinga War (Hirakawa, 1993) but many other Rock Edicts of Ashoka do. There is no apology,

no repentance, to the people that he actually killed. The repentance story and the mention of the casualties of the Kalinga war, are only mentioned in the Edicts which are far away from Kalinga. Another instance wherein Ashoka's image has been shown to us as a merciful King, is when he is considered to be a lover of Animals (Singh, 2004) (Silva, 2009). In his 1st Rock Edict, Ashoka mentions how no living being are to be slaughtered or offered for sacrifice, in his Empire (Dhammika, 2000). However, the very same Edict mentions that Ashoka did not stop consuming the meat of animals, even after the Edict (Dhammika, 2000). If he truly loved all the animals, he would be the first one to stop consuming their meat but he did not and this reveals another major propaganda of and about Ashoka. Not only that, even though Ashoka mentioned that he has ordered a ban on the killing of animals, however, fish continued to remain as an important commodity in the Mauryan Empire (Thapar, 1961). This reveals that when it came to money and Empire, Ashoka prioritised them above the propagandic message about himself that he laid down through his Edicts. One of the main goals of Buddhism is conquest of one's lust and not engaging in any kind of lustful activities, which would be detrimental to one's path towards Nirvana (Silva, 2009). However, Ashoka while being considered to be a patron of Buddhism, was the same person who did not keep this basic tenet of Buddhism. Ashoka's Edicts mention about the existence harem (Thapar, 1961). It is true that it was not uncommon for rich and powerful men, let



alone King, during those times, to have a harem. However, what makes Ashoka different is the fact that he was a patron of Buddhism and that he preached about Dhamma his entire life through his own Edicts. This reveals the utter hypocrisy and double-standards of Ashoka. Another instance wherein Ashoka's propaganda about him being a devout follower of Buddhism and him preaching Dharma, dates back to the third Buddhist Council, which is not mentioned in any of his inscriptions. When the Council was called, even the non-orthodox sects were present over there (Thapar, 1961). The entry of non-orthodox sects led to a laxity of Buddhist observances and practices and as a result of this, the elder orthodox Buddhists, refused to perform the "patimokka" ceremony, as they were order (Thapar, 1961). When they refused, they were killed by the Mauryan Empire (Thapar, 1961). Another version of Ashoka being preached to the people today, is that of an efficient administrator. This however is proved to be wrong by historical evidence. Ashoka had a large Empire to manage. All this required "efficient" bureaucracy, which is a requirement that Ashoka was not able to meet. Ashoka created a class of bureaucracy, known as – "Dhamma Mahamatras" (Aggarwal, 1999). The Dhamma Mahamatras, as said by Ashoka in his Edicts, were responsible for carrying out all the administrative works in the Mauryan Empire and for religious works too (Dhammika, 2000). However, the Dhamma Mahamatras, were an example of a failed bureaucracy. Through them, Ashoka merely purchased the stability of his Empire for the time being (Aggarwal, 1999). The Dhamma Mahamatras were not based on meritocracy, for the simple fact that they came from noble and affluent families (Aggarwal, 1999). In fact, even the cost of maintaining the Dhamma Mahamatras was so substantial as they cost 25 percent of the total revenue of the Mauryan State (Aggarwal, 1999). This failed bureaucracy was one of the reasons why after Ashoka's death, many kingdoms eventually declared their independence after his death, such as the Satvahanas and the Kalingas (Aggarwal, 1999). Another one of Ashoka's failure was the heavy taxing of the merchants by the Mauryan Empire. Since the Arthashastra mentions that filling of the treasury is very important (Saxena, 2014), the Mauryans imposed heavy taxes on the Merchants (Thapar, 1961). The taxes were so heavy that the Merchants considered it to be better to rather pay the people who worked for the Mauryans than the Mauryans themselves, which eventually led to a rise in corruption (Thapar, 1961). This continued during Ashoka's reign and reveals his failure to tackle the growing corruption in the Mauryan Empire, along with a failed system of bureaucracy. All this reveals the propaganda about Ashoka's greatness by himself as well as throughout history.

IV. THE MYTH OF ASHOKA'S CONVERSION



The popular story regarding Ashoka's conversion is that, when Ashoka saw the dead soldiers after the Kalinga war and the destruction which resulted from the war, he became greatly disturbed as a result of which, he converted to Buddhism (Ghosh, n.d.). Violence was something that was not new to Ashoka. As a member of the Mauryan Royal Family, he knew about violence and bloodshed in the beginning and that he might have to one day, be the reason for it. The fact that Ashoka created a prison for torturing people and that he killed his half-brothers, in his struggle for succession, reveals that the story is almost false. To say that a man was not affected by the killing of his own brothers but affected by the killing of common citizen, who were alien to him, is most certainly a false narrative. Ashoka was actually converted to Buddhism before the war and his conversion process was not instantaneous but rather, gradual. There are two accounts of Ashoka's conversion-

1. The Sri Lankan Pali Sources and
2. The Ashokan inscriptions (Guruge, 1986).

The Sri Lankan Pali Sources mention that Ashoka became a Buddhist, during the 4th year after his conversion and does not mention the Kalinga War at all. On the other hand, the Ashokan inscriptions mention that Ashoka showed great remorse after the Kalinga War, following which, he became a lay follower of Buddhism and later started his close association with the Buddhist Sangha, in the 10th year after conversion (Guruge, 1986). Now the important question is-Which source should be considered more authentic? The Sri Lankan Pali Source or the inscriptions of Ashoka? The same question was faced by T.W. Rhys Davids (Davids, 1903). He said that there is truth in both the sources but implied that though the evidence of Sri Lankan Pali Sources came later, they should still be considered to be authentic and hence, he implied that Ashoka's

conversion to Buddhism was before the Kalinga War (Davids, 1903). A more specific account was given by M. Macphail. He has argued that the conversion of Ashoka after the war, cannot be possible because the head of a great military Empire, which expanded its boundaries in no time, through violence, would not be overwhelmed by violence and that Ashoka already knew about Buddhism and followed it before the war itself, because of which, the war that he fought might have completely convinced him that violence was not the answer. There is an point which can be seen in the Prakrit- "Tato Paca Adhuna Ladhesu Kaligesu". This sentence describes Ashoka's involvement in the Kalinga War. Most importantly, what this text conveys is, "now that it has been done". So, what the text wants to convey through its syntactical form is that the annexation of the Kalinga was a necessity for Ashoka (Guruge, 1986). That it was a duty for him as a Mauryan Emperor to do that. Ashoka had to do that, which posed a threat to the security of his Empire. This itself proves that whether Ashoka converted to Buddhism before the war or after the war, would be no consequence in his initiative to start the war as he would disregard the principle of "non-violence" of Buddhism to answer his call of duty. Therefore, Buddhism would not have had an effect in preventing the war and the Kalinga War, in turn, would not have had an in converting Ashoka to Buddhism. Another important point is, if the Sri Lankan Pali Sources were indeed biased in favour of Ashoka, why then, did they not mention his immediate conversion after the War? If the entire point was to showcase how great of an effect Buddhism had over Ashoka, then wouldn't it suit the narrative better that Ashoka immediately converted to Buddhism after violence than mentioning that Ashoka became a Buddhist before the war?(which the Sri Lankan Pali sources mention) (Guruge, 1986). Thus, a strict interpretation of the Prakrit language, would deprive the popular myth of Ashoka's conversion, from much of its dramatism and it confirms that the Sri Lankan Pali Sources are accurate and that the entire myth surrounding Ashoka's change of heart after the Kalinga War, remains to be a myth.

V. CONCLUSION

In attempting to answer the three questions that we set ourselves at the beginning of this analysis, we can see that variation of Ashoka's character, which we do not hear often. While attempting to answer the first question, we have found the negative aspect of Ashoka's dichotomous character. While attempting to answer the second question, we have found that Ashoka was greatly interested in what people thought about him and how they perceived him as an Emperor and that he left no stones unturned to churn a propaganda which suited his desired assumption about his character. While attempting to answer the third question, we have found the myth of Ashoka's conversion after the Kalinga war to be truly a myth. We have also found

in our course of research that the Ashokan inscriptions cannot be considered to be authentic at all times. Ashoka is a complex Emperor, whose legacy is clearly mixed. So, why is Ashoka put on the pedestal, while many Indian Kings are ignored? The political class which fought for India's Independence, had to construct a story of a United India. A geographically, ethnically, linguistically and a culturally diverse country and ultimately, in essence, a country full of countries. Ashoka ruled over the largest swath of land than any Indian King in the history. This suited perfectly with the Independence leaders' agenda of a figure who could represent what India was during Independence and what it still is. Ashoka was also a North-Indian, in-line with modern-India's political majority. In his Edicts, he promoted religious tolerance and tolerance of all religious traditions but he did not live up to those principles. From this research paper, we can conclude that while choosing an historical leader to represent India as a whole, Ashoka is uniquely well equipped, so long as we stick to the sanitised version for as the Lion Capital of Ashoka ultimately states - "Truth Alone Triumphs".

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