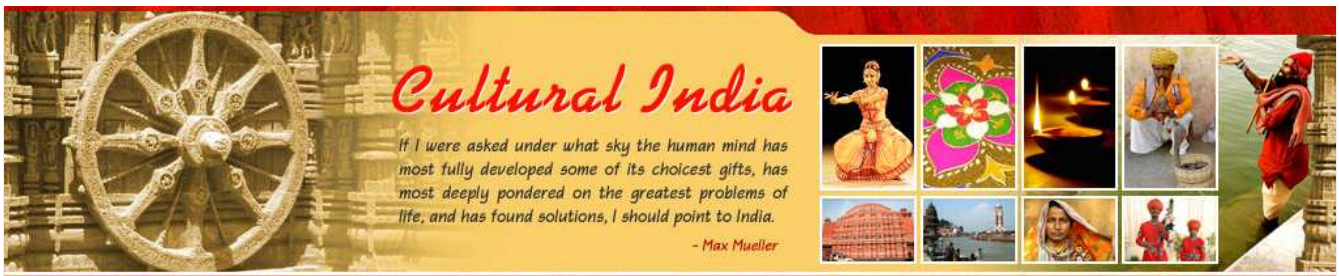

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Given here is the biography of Buddhist Emperor Asoka. Read on to know about the life history of King Ashoka or Asoka the Great.

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Ashoka

Asoka was one of the most powerful kings of the Indian subcontinent. A ruler of the Mauryan Empire, Ashoka ruled over the country from 273 BC to 232 BC. The reign of Emperor Asoka covered most of India, South Asia and beyond, stretching from present day Afghanistan and parts of Persia in the west, to Bengal and Assam in the east, and Mysore in the south. However, the Battle of Kalinga changed King Asoka completely. From a power hungry emperor, he turned into a Buddhist follower and started preaching the principles of Buddhism throughout the world. Read on this biography to know more about the life history of 'Ashoka the Great':

Early Life

Asoka was born in 304 BC, to Mauryan Emperor Bindusara and a relatively lower ranked queen, Dharma. The legend associated with the emperor goes that his birth had been predicted by Buddha, in the story of 'The Gift of Dust'. Buddhist Emperor Ashoka had only one younger sibling, Vitthashoka, but, several elder half-brothers. Right from his childhood days Ashoka showed great promise in the field of weaponry skills as well as academics.

Accession to the Throne

Asoka quickly grew into an excellent warrior general and an astute statesman. His command on the Mauryan army started growing day by day and because of this, his elder brothers became suspicious of him being favored by Bindusara as the next emperor. The eldest son of Bindusara, Prince Susima, convinced him to send Asoka to Takshashila province (in Sindh) to control an uprising caused by the formation of different militias. However, the moment Ashoka reached the province, the militias welcomed him with open arms and the uprising came to an end without any fight. This particular success of Asoka made his elder brothers, especially Susima, more insecure.

Susima started inciting Bindusara against Ashoka, who was then sent into exile by the emperor. Asoka went to Kalinga, where he met a fisherwoman named Kaurwaki. He fell in love with her and later, made Kaurwaki his second or third wife. Soon, the province of Ujjain started witnessing a violent uprising. Emperor Bindusara called back Ashoka from the exile and sent him to Ujjain. The prince was injured in the ensuing battle and was treated by Buddhist monks and nuns. It was in Ujjain that Asoka first came to know about the life and teachings of Buddha. In Ujjain, he also met Devi, his personal nurse, who later became his wife.

In the following year, Bindusura became seriously ill and was literally on his deathbed. A group of ministers, led by Radhagupta, called upon Ashoka to assume the crown. In the fight that followed his accession, Ashoka attacked Pataliputra, now Patna, and killed all his brothers, including Susima. After he became the King, Ashoka launched brutal assaults to expand his empire, which lasted for around eight years. Around this time, his Buddhist queen, Devi, gave birth to Prince Mahindra and Princess Sanghamitra.

The Battle of Kalinga

The battle of Kalinga (now Orissa) became a turning point in the life of 'Asoka the Great'. The exact reason for the battle is not known. However, it is believed that one of Ashoka's brothers took refuge at Kalinga and this enraged Asoka, who launched a brutal assault on the province. The whole of the province was plundered and destroyed and thousands of people were killed.

Embracing & Spreading Buddhism

It is said that after the battle of Kalinga was over, King Asoka went on a tour of the city. He could see nothing except burnt houses and scattered corpses. This was the first time in his life that Emperor Ashoka realized the consequences of wars and battles. It is said that even after he had returned to Patliputra, he was haunted by the scenes he saw in Kalinga. Even his queen, Devi, who was a Buddhist, left him after seeing the brutality at Kalinga.

It was during this time that he embraced Buddhism under the Brahmin Buddhist sages, Radhaswami and Manjushri. After adopting Buddhism, Asoka started propagating its principles throughout the world, even as far as ancient Rome and Egypt. Infact, he can be credited with making the first serious attempt to develop a Buddhist policy.

Policy

Buddhist Emperor Asoka built thousands of Stupas and Viharas for Buddhist followers. One of his stupas, the Great Sanchi Stupa, has been declared as a World Heritage Site by UNECSO. The Ashoka Pillar at Sarnath has a four-lion capital, which was later adopted as the national emblem of the modern Indian republic. Throughout his life, 'Asoka the Great' followed the policy of nonviolence or ahimsa. Even the slaughter or mutilation of animals was abolished in his kingdom. He promoted the concept of vegetarianism. The caste system ceased to exist in his eyes and he treated all his subjects as equals. At the same time, each and every person was given the rights to freedom, tolerance, and equality.

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Missions to Spread Buddhism
The third council of Buddhism was held under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka. He also supported the Vibhajjavada sub-school of the Sthaviravada sect, now known as the Pali Theravada. He sent his missionaries to the following places:

- Kashmir - Gandhara Majjhantika
- Mahisamandala (Mysore) - Mahadeva
- Vanavasi (Tamil Nadu) - Rakkhita
- Aparantaka (Gujarat and Sindh) - Yona Dhammarakkhita
- Maharattha (Maharashtra) - Mahadhammarakkhita
- "Country of the Yona" (Bactria/ Seleucid Empire) - Maharakkhita
- Himavanta (Nepal) - Majjhima
- Suvannabhumi (Thailand/ Myanmar) - Sona and Uttara
- Lankadipa (Sri Lanka) - Mahamahinda

His missionaries also went to the below mentioned places:

- Seleucid Empire (Middle Asia)
- Egypt
- Macedonia
- Cyrene (Libya)
- Epirus (Greece and Albania)

Death
After ruling over the Indian subcontinent for a period of approximately 40 years, the Great Emperor Asoka left for the holy abode in 232 BC. After his death, his empire lasted for just fifty more years.

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