

For bloodshed & peace

The Fight For The Land That Turned A Great Wrathful Warrior Into A Saint

Prologue

As a child, prince Ashoka had heard sundry tales of his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya's valour, the same man who had unified the Indian subcontinent under one empire. Naturally, then, ever since Ashoka had been anointed as the natural heir to the throne of Magadha in 273 BC, his only dream was to expand the boundaries of his empire. Little did he then know that the expansion, leading to a war, was about to plunge him into something that would change the course of his life and of history.

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Scene I: King Ashoka pacing up and down in his royal chamber

Ashoka: Yes, I am going to conquer Kalinga and make my forefathers proud.

Commander of the army: I agree, my king. Kalinga has valuable ports that serve as a gateway for trade with the far east. Its powerful navy, howbeit, has supreme control over the coastline.

Ashoka's prime minister: Kalinga also has the power to interrupt communication between our capital Pataliputra and other cities in the central Indian peninsula.

Ashoka (speaking impatiently): Yes, yes, all that is fine, but what is more important for me is its annexation, because both my



grandfather and my father tried and failed to do so. It's the only independent kingdom which is not a part of the Mauryan empire, and that needs to change. Start preparing for the war on Kalinga!

Scene II: King Ashoka and his wife walking in the palace garden

Maharani Devi: My dear husband, I implore you to rethink. After all, Kalinga has proven to be a sore point for all Mauryan kings in the past.

Ashoka: Well, I did try the friendly route. I had sent an emissary to the ruler of Kalinga, King Srutayudha, requesting him to submit the kingdom to us. He refused and now I have no choice left.

Maharani Devi: My prayers are with you, my king.

Scene III: The night before the Kalinga war commences in 261 BC

Ashoka: Give me the status of our army and that of our enemy's.

Commander of the army: Do not worry, my king. Our force is much stronger. Victory is going to be ours!

Ashoka: How can you be so sure?

Commander of the army: Sir, the Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, is doing a lot of research on the Mauryan empire for his book. He has noted that our military strength is around one lakh, consisting of 1700 horses, thousands of elephants, and some 60,000 soldiers. Our spy tells us that

the Kalinga army, on the other hand, has only 60,000 infantry, 1,000 cavalymen, and around 700 elephants.

Ashoka: Then tomorrow will be an interesting day.

Scene IV: The war is won; Ashoka roams around the battlefield

Ashoka (weeping silently): How valiantly Kalinga fought! All this bloodshed has turned the waters of River Daya red. So much death, so much pain...I can't bear this sight.

Commander of the army (speaking softly): Our estimate says that around 100,000 soldiers have been killed in the battle. We have captured 150,000 soldiers from Kalinga, but their condition tells me they are not going to live either.

Ashoka's PM: But Kalinga is now the fifth province of the Magadha empire along with Prachaya, Avanti, Uttarapatha, and Dakshinapatha. We have succeeded.

Ashoka (throwing his sword down): How does it matter? This is just a hollow victory.

Scene V: Ashoka weeps and ultimately decides to embrace Buddhism

Ashoka: After witnessing the agony on the

battleground, my heart is shattered. I have decided to mend my ways and work for the good of humanity. I am devoting the rest of my life to *ahinsa* (non-violence) and *dharma-vijaya* (victory by dharma).

Maharani Devi: What a great decision, my king. It's not war but *dharma* that will make you immortal in the annals of history. I am with you and so will be our children. They will travel far and wide to spread the teachings of Buddhism.

Ashoka: My *dharma* now is to practice honesty, truthfulness, compassion, mercifulness, benevolence, and non-violence. I will respect all religions and give them full freedom to live according to their own principles. To attain that, I am appointing a special class of high officers called the 'dharma ministers' who will foster *dharma* work and relieve human suffering.

Epilogue

Kalinga remained Ashoka's first and last war. For, post that, the only glory he sought was to lead his people along the path of *dharma* (also known as *dhamma*). His *dharma* laws were, as such, carved into rocks and stone pillars across Magadha. He also sent missionaries from his empire to other countries to preach Buddhism so that more people could adopt a non-violent way of life. His sole focus on non-violence, however, also became one of the factors that led to the eventual fall of the Mauryan empire after his death in 232 BC.

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