CHAPTER IV

Asoka: His Life and Mission in Maharashtra

In the annals of kingship there is scarcely any record comparable to that of Asoka, the Great, both as a man and as a ruler. The features of his greatness have been described by many of the historians. R.K. Mookerji puts it in the following words and says, "To bring out the chief features of his greatness, historians have instituted comparisons between him and other distinguished monarchs in history, eastern and western, ancient and modern, Pagan, Moslem and Christian. In his efforts to establish a kingdom of righteousness after the highest ideals of a theocracy, he has been linked to David and Solomon of Israel in the days of its greatest glory, in his patronage of Buddhism, which helped to transform a local into a world religion, he has been compared to Constantine, in relation to Christianity, in his philosophy and piety he recalls Marcus Aurelius, he was a Charlemagne in the extent of his empire and to some extent in the methods of his administration. Lastly, he has been compared to Khalif Omar and Emperor Akabar, whom also he resembles in certain respects."¹

It is very interesting to note how this great emperor of the world was converted to Buddhism and became a devout Buddhist. Neither Chandragupta nor his son Bindusāra were Buddhist, but the third in the race, Piyadasi, best known, under the name of Asoka openly adopted the new popular creed. It is because of this, that his name is honoured wherever the teachings of the Buddha have spread and is respected from the Volga to Japan, from Ceylon to Thailand and to the borders of Mongolia and Siberia. "If man's fame", says Koppen, "Can be measured by the number of hearts who revere his memory, by the number of lips, who have mentioned and still mention him with honour, Asoka is more famous than Charlemagne or Caesar." ²

"Like his Christian parallel Constantine, he was converted by a miracle so highly do the Buddhist scribes estimate his adhesion to their cause, and yet it cannot be doubted that it was the first great step to its expulsion from India. After his conversion which took place in the tenth year of his reign, he became a very zealous supporter of the new religion."³

It may again be interesting to know some thing of

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² Koppen quoted in - Rhys Davids - Buddhism, pp. 221-222.
³ Rhys Davids - Buddhism, pp. 221-222.
the spread of Buddha's teaching during the period between Mahāparinibbāna and the reign of Asoka (about 483 B.C. to 256 B.C.). Not many details are available. "Chandragupta Maurya, Asoka's grandfather was not admirer of Buddha. There is no evidence to show that he was against him either. How far and in what way Buddha's teachings spread in India and abroad during that period would be a very interesting study. But it seems certain that by the time of Asoka it had made definite progress and it had secured a hold on the minds of the people."  

Asoka And His Family:  

we have to consider the two main sources for his life history, first Ceylonese and Indian Legends and the second his edicts, which throw much light on his life and career as an emperor.

Ceylonese tradition as narrated in the Dipavamsa and the Mahāvamsa makes Bindusara the husband of sixteen wives and father of 101 sons, of whom only three are named, viz. Sumana, the eldest, Asoka and Tishya (uterin brother of Asoka) the youngest son. The mother of Asoka in the northern tradition is Subhadāngi, the beautiful daughter of a Brahmin of Champa, who bore

5. Dipavamsa - Chapter VI, p. 43.  
Bindusara another son named Vigatāsoka and not Tishya of the Ceylonese books. In the southern tradition she is called Dharmā, the principal queen, aggamahisi.

"More definite indications as to the identity of Asoka's mother are given in the other sources, the Asokāvadāna, the Divyāvadāna and the Vamsatthapakāsini and describes her as the daughter of a Brahmin of Campā." 7 "It is said that she was kept away from the king by palace intrigue and that when at last she gained access to him and bore him a son, she said of the child, 'I am without sorrow' i.e. Asoka. When she bore the king a second son she called him Vitāsoka, 'Sorrow Terminated'. In the Ceylonese sources the queen is called Dharmā. 8 The Divyāvadāna version agrees largely with that of the Asokāvadāna. She is called Janapadakalyāṇi or in the other versions of the same source Subhadrāngi and again described as a daughter of a Brahmin of Campā." 9

We have considerable evidence from the Ceylonese sources on the viceroyalty of Asoka at Ujjain. This information concerns his personal life. We are told that

at Vidisa he met the beautiful Devi, the daughter of a local merchant with whom he fell in love. Thaper while giving the family background of Asoka says, "There is no reference to a marriage in the Dipavamsa, though it is said that two children were born, Mahinda and Samghamittā, both of whom are connected with Buddhist mission to Ceylon. The tradition of Devi could well be true, since it does not interfere with the flow of events concerning the life of Asoka."

Thaper further adds - "In another Ceylonese sources, Devi is referred to as Vidisāmahādevi and a Sākyāni." Tradition also said that Devi preferred to stay at Vidisā rather than move to Pātaliputra when Asoka became king. It has been suggested that this was because she was a pious Buddhist and since by then Vidisā had become a centre of Buddhism, she chose to remain there. She is also supposed to have been instrumental in Asoka's adoption of Buddhism and in Mahinda's becoming a monk.

11. Thaper, R. - Asoka and Decline of Mouryan Empire, p. 22.
Some members of the king's immediate family are mentioned in various sources. The chief queen for the most part of his reign was Asandhimitā, who is well spoken of in the Mahāvamsa. She died four years prior to the death of Asoka, and on her death Tissarakkhitā was raised to the rank of chief queen. Comments on the later in Buddhist sources are not complimentary, since she was responsible for injuring the Bodhi-Tree. Asoka's marriage to Tissarakkhitā may have occurred late in his life, since he appears to have been considerably under her influence, judging by the Avadāna stories.

"A second queen Kāruvāki is mentioned in the queen's Edict inscribed on a pillar at Allahabad, in which her religious and charitable donations are referred to. She is described as the mother of the prince Tivara, the only one to be mentioned by name in the inscription. It is clear from its position on the pillar that this edict was issued towards the end of Asoka's reign. It ordered the Māhāmattas (officers) to record whatever donations were made by Kāruvāki. It has been suggested that Kāruvāki was in fact the personal name of the queen Tissarakkhitā, and that she assumed the later name on becoming the chief queen. The reference to her being the second queen would agree with the fact that

Tissarakkhita was the second Chief queen. It would certainly fit to the character of Tissarakkhita to demand that all her donations be recorded.  

Another queen referred to in Divyavadana as the third wife of Asoka was Padmavati. Despite of his enthusiasm for Buddhism, Asoka did not forgo the royal privilege of having many wives. Although Padmavati was never a chief queen she was all the same the mother of the crown-prince Kunala, also called Dharmavivardhana as the son of Asoka who had been appointed vice-roy of Gandhara. The Rajatarangini mentions Jalauka another son of Asoka, but his mother's name is not given.

Two of Asoka's daughters are known to us, one was Samghamitta of the Ceylon chronicles, to whom we have already referred. The other was Caruvaki, who is said to have married Devapala, the Kshatriya. Of the grandsons of Asoka, the two most frequently mentioned are Samprati, the son of Kunala and Dasaratha.

Thus, taking the legends and Edicts together, we find the following relations of Asoka:


Father - Binduśāra, who had many wives
Mother - Subhadrāngī - as named in the northern tradition, also called Dharmā in the southern tradition.

Brothers - 1. Susima or Sumana eldest, but step-brother.
2. Tishya - Uterine and youngest brother, also called Vitāsoka or Vigatāsoka in the northern legends.
3. Vitāsoka - according to Theragatha

Wives - 1. Devi - with the full name Vīdisā Mahādevi Sakyakumāri.
2. Kāruvāki - called Dvitiyā Devi, Tivaramātā, second queen, mother of Tivara.
3. Asandhimitā - designated as Agramahisi - Chief queen,
4. Padmāvati,
5. Tissarakkhita.

Sons - 1. Mahinda - son of Devi,
2. Tivara - son of Kāruvāki,
3. Kunāla - son of Padmāvati; also known by the name of Dharmavivardhana
The edicts tell of four princes serving as viceroy in four different and remote provinces and designated as 'kumāras or Aryaputras, as distinguished from the sons of a lower status called Dālakas from the status of their mothers.

Daughters - 1. Samghamittā - whose mother was Devi,
               2. Chārumati.

               2. Devapāla Kshatriya - married to Chārumati.

Grandsons - 1. Dasaratha - who became king
               2. Samprati - son of Kunāla,
               3. Sumana - son of Samghamitta.18

Asoka's accession to throne:

Concerning the actual accession there is general agreement on the point that Asoka was not a crown prince and that there was a struggle among the princes for the throne. The Divyavedana states that "Bindusāra when dying wished to appoint his son Susima as king, but his ministers placed Asoka on the throne instead."19 The legend

suggests that Asoka had the support of Rādhagupta, the chief minister of Bindusāra. We are told that Asoka was viceroy of Uttarāpatha with his headquarter at Taxila at the time of Bindusāra's death. He had been sent there to supersede Susima his elder brother and to quell the revolt at Taxila, which Susima had failed to suppress. Whenthe throne at Pataliputra fell vacant it was seized by Asoka with the help of Rādhagupta. The sources are in agreement that Asoka was viceroy of a province when Bindusāra died, although the province is not the same in the text. The Mahāvamsa states that, "Asoka caused his eldest brother to be slain. Elsewhere in the same work and in the Dipavamsa there is mention of his having killed his ninetynine brothers born of various wives of Bindusara."

The northern and southern legends, however, agree as regards the disputed succession, which may, therefore, be taken as a fact. "The southern legends are far wide of the truth in making Asoka a fraticide, the murderer of 99 brothers for the sake of the throne, for which he is dubbed Chandāsoka (Mahāvamsa V-180). Senart (Inscription ii-101) has shown well how the legends themselves are not at one in their account of Asoka's career of cruelty. Tārānāth makes Asoka kill only six brothers. Other authorities do not attribute to him any murder at

Asoka's conversion to Buddhism:

"This deep and dedicated sensitiveness to the cruel consequences of war, worked a revolution in the character of Asoka. He became a changed man, both in his personal and public life." 24

"But the horrors which must accompany war, even successful war, made a deep impression on the heart of the victorious monarch, who has recorded on the rocks in imperishable words the sufferings of the vanquished and the remorse of the victor. The record is instinct with personal feeling, and still carries across the ages the moan of a human soul. The words clearly are those of the king himself, for no secretary of State would dare to express in such a language 'the profound sorrow and regret' felt by His Sacred Majesty." 25

The rocks tell the tale and describe how the king regretted the damages caused by the war. "The Kalinga was conquered by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty, the king when he had been consecrated eight years. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were thence carried away captive, one hundred thousand were there slain, and many times that number died. Directly after the Kalinga had been annexed,

24. Ibid., p. 17.
rounded off and secured a more suitable frontier in the south-east. But instead of increasing his appetite for conquest as normally happens, the Kalinga war brought a complete reaction in his mind. Therein lies the greatness of Asoka and as this incident marks a turning point in his career, it may be described at some length.22

R.K. Mookerji has computed the losses of the Kalinga war under three heads. He says, "The losses of the war in this ancient document are indeed computed on most modern principles under three heads. 1. The losses inflicted on the combatants by death, wounds or capture. 2. The losses suffered by the families of the combatants thus affected and 3. The suffering caused to the friends of the bereaved or afflicted families. Lastly comes the mental anguish of the sovereign who has singly to bear the whole weight of his peoples' sorrows. Thus Asoka is most modern in his estimate of the cruelties of war as equally affecting the combatants and non-combatants on the civilian element in a society based upon the joint family as the Unit. In a society so closely knit together, in a system of intimate relations, it is no wonder that a war affects the civilian population almost as much as those sent to the front - the bereaved relations of the dead, and the friends of their survivors."23

22. Mujumdar R.C. (Ed.) - The Age of Imperial Unity, pp. 73-74.

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