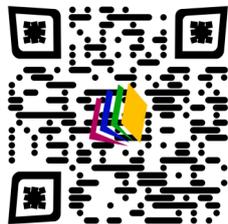


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## Ideas related to war in Ancient India: Mahābhārata, Aśoka and Hero-Stones

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Over the years, perspectives towards the idea of war have resulted in a fierce debate that ensues till date. On one side are the pacifists who believe that war and violence are unjustifiable. On the other side are the hawkish militarists who feel that engaging in violence for one's cause requires no justification. It is rather interesting to note that this debate between violence and non-violence can be traced in ancient Indian history too. This paper attempts to explore two perspectives of war which are polar opposites of each other. The two differing viewpoints have been explored through the lens of the Mahabharata and Ashokan inscriptions. Moreover, this essay will also briefly highlight how the study of perspectives towards war in ancient India can be made more nuanced and rich by carefully studying the tradition of hero-stones along with the texts and inscriptions.

**KEY WORDS:** Mahābhārata, Aśoka, Megalithic, Hero Stones, Ancient India

While studying the history of ancient India hardly anyone can miss the predominance of wars and battles. Since the starting of historical period there are references of wars, for instance the 'gaveśnā' or 'gaveṣṭhi' of early Vedic period. Even in the later Vedic period there are evidences of rituals and sacrifices, such as the Aśvamedha yajña or rājasuya yajña, which were done with the motive of acquiring more and more territory, obviously through the means of warfare. Moreover, it seems through the study of different texts and other sources, especially through panegyrics or praśastis that most of the ancient Indian kings boast about their victories in battles and often a list of their enemies whom they had defeated in battle was provided by their court poets. It seems, being a great warrior was considered as an important attribute of a king and a quality worth boasting. However, in the ancient period, amid all this warfare and bloodshed, there was one king who did not take pride in fighting battles and massacring people, there was one ambassador of peace, the Mauryan king Aśoka. Historians still wonder about this king, whether he was a pacifist or a pragmatic? This essay is an attempt to understand how different 'ideas'

were attached with war in ancient India. The main emphasis will be laid on ideas of war in Mahabharata whereas how historians come across with a different corpus of ideas related to war in the context of Aśokan edicts.

The two epics provide the historians a window to see how war was perceived by ancient Indians. Mahābhārata itself is a story of two dynastic lineages, Pāndavas and Kauravas, who ultimately fight each other over territorial claims. Mahabharata also points out to the concept of patriliney (patriliney means tracing descent from father to son, grandson and so on) and how this idea was highly valued so much so that it takes them to the war. Mahabharata provides a direct view to the social reality how a feud over land and power changes the relationship between the two groups of warring cousins. Ultimately the matter was sorted out in a battle field. When Pāndavas returned from the exile of thirteen years Duryodhana refused to give Pāndavas their kingdom. Initially, Yudhiṣṭhira did not react. He hesitated in going to war. Moreover, in the *Udyogparva* it is shown that before the battle various peace missions were sent. This shows that these peace missions could have been a feature of ancient Indian societies, may be before most wars peace missions were sent to avoid wars. The *Udyogparva* of Mahābhārata also contains debates on war and peace indicating that how before going on war pros and cons of the situation were carefully analysed.

*Udyogparva* ends by showing that all the peace missions ultimately failed and thus war became inevitable and both the sides started preparing for war. After the *Udyogparva* comes the famous episode of Bhagavadgītā भगवद् गीता-“the song of

god”. Bhagavadgītā is a part of *Bhismaparvan*. It is placed at the starting of battle books and some scholars consider it as one of the oldest parts of the epic. Numerous commentaries have been published on Bhagavadgītā which provides different views of the essentials. But some scholars consider Bhagavadgītā भगवद् गीता as a later interpolation. Von Simson has argued that Bhagavadgītā was a text which was written separately but was interpolated at later time in the epic. Angelika Malinar also supports this view.

Bhagavadgītā starts with Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s question about what’s happening on the battlefield. Arjuna who is in a complete moral dilemma and denies to fight by saying that the people on the other side are not his enemies but his own kinsmen (*bandhus*). Arjuna says that a warrior fights for his family but in this case his own kinsmen are his enemies and thus he does not desire victory (*vijaya*) or kingdom (*rājya*). Thus, here Arjuna gives importance to one’s *kuladharmā* in opposition to *kṣatriyadharmā*. Unable to deal with the immediate problem at hand, Arjuna seeks guidance from Kṛṣṇa who gives him immense knowledge on life and dharma. Kṛṣṇa admonishes him and says it’s the duty of the warrior to fight and Arjuna should see himself as blessed one that he got this opportunity to fight in this righteous battle (*dharmayudh*). Kṛṣṇa addresses Arjuna’s grief by pointing out the immortality of soul. Thus, there is one indestructible being (*sat*), which cannot be killed. Thus, Kṛṣṇa makes the whole question of killing an illusion(2.21). So, it is foolish to think of oneself as a killer.

Apart from the metaphysical sense, Kṛṣṇa motivates Arjuna to fight by reminding him of his *svadharmā* as a Kṣatriya. Arjuna has nothing to lose because

it's his *svadharma* to fight as a warrior. As a warrior if he wins then he will get back his kingdom and if he dies in the battle then he will attain heaven. So, it's a win-win situation for him. On the other hand if he refuses from fighting then that will bring him dishonour (*akīrti*). Arjuna fights with his own battle with his mind and heart and was unable to take any decision. Thus, a clear conflict between the *kuladharmā* and *kṣatriyadharmā* can be seen here.

However, historians encounter completely different set of arguments in the Aśokan edicts in the context of war. Historians noticed a completely different way how war was perceived by Aśoka. In this essay one particular edict of Aśoka will be discussed- the thirteenth rock edict. However, one can know about the ideas of Aśoka about war through his other edicts as well and one can get a better understanding of the larger picture by studying all these edicts in a composite manner, in relation to each other.

Aśoka the great was the third ruler of the Mauryan Empire (304-232 BCE) and he was very famous for controlling such a vast empire. He was able to control northern india along with southern india because of his great administrative skills. Aśoka was the first emperor who for the first time tried to communicate through his subjects directly. Historians often call him as an innovator and indeed he was, because back at that time in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE he thought of inscribing his message on rocks. Not only this, he is the only known king who did not take pride in fighting wars. Even in that period when the greatness of a king was often equated with the number of battles he had won or with the expansion of territory he holds, Aśoka saw war as deplorable.

He expressed his ideas about war most clearly in the thirteenth rock edict. This edict shows how Aśoka felt after the Kalinga war(ended c.265BCE). Aśoka's response to the battle of kalinga was recorded in this edict where Aśoka also referred to as the beloved of god or the priyadasi in many of his inscriptions, feels deep remorse. This edict is a kind of reflection on the consequences of war. In this edict Aśoka says that suffering arising from war did not just include the pain of people who were physically hurt but it also involves a deeper suffering which was felt by the relatives, friends and family members of the one who was injured in the battle. Thus, here Aśoka talks not only about the physical suffering in the context of war but also about the emotional suffering. He talks about the pain of the common people who did not participate in the war directly but were affected by it. The suffering of householders, brāhmaṇas, śramaṇas and all others living there was seen by him as deplorable. This shows how deeply Aśoka was affected by the suffering of these people. No king in ancient India ever expressed such remorse over a battle which he had won. Rather other kings glorify their victories and see winning battles as a thing which magnifies their grandeur.

However, Aśoka did not become a pacifist altogether because this same edict also contains a warning for the forest people (*aṭavis*). The tone of the edict changes while addressing these people. Including a warning to *aṭavis* in a royal inscription suggest that these forest people must have posed a serious challenge to the empires of that time. These people are told about his power and not about his repentance. Thus, this suggest that Aśoka could use force when it was required and he had not renounced violence altogether.

But still Aśoka considers *dhammavijaya* as the best form of conquering. He also says that this *dhammavijaya* has been won repeatedly by him in his neighbouring areas and also in the areas beyond his borders. He even asks his successors to follow this path of *dhammavijaya*. But may be he was aware about the reality of that time and therefore he did not rule out the possibility of a conflict but he says that his successors should resort to fighting only in rarest of the rare cases and even if they have to give punishments then they should be merciful in their conduct. Thus, he redefines the whole idea of righteous victory.

So, Aśoka unlike other ancient rulers did not believe in fighting battles rather he was preaching non-violence and his main aim was to ensure the welfare of his people and help them to attain heaven. He used the inscriptions to proliferate his generous messages and such messages included ideas like respect towards elders, generosity towards Brahmans and those who renounced wordly life, also suggested that the slaves and servants should be treated with kindness, respect for religion of once own as well as religion of others. According to him by following *dhamma* his people can attain fruits in this as well as in the other world and a king is obliged to help his people in following *dhamma* and this obligation is often expressed as a debt<sup>70</sup> in his edicts. Moreover, he considers himself as the emperor of all the living beings (*panas, jivas*) coming under his empire. Thus, he opened many hospitals even for the animals and even tried to make the royal household vegetarian.<sup>71</sup> So he considered himself as the emperor of a larger 'moral' empire whose boundary extends beyond his political empire.

Hence, something very different was going on here.

While other ancient kings were often busy in fighting battles, acquiring territory and glorifying their victories, Aśoka saw war as deplorable and reprehensible. Asoka was in fact concerned about the inculcation of goodness among his subjects which would help them in the attainment of heaven. So, things like goodness, merit (*punya*), demerit (*pāpa*), happiness, attainment of heaven, non-violence (*ahimsa*) etc., which were not at all important for other kings, were central doctrines not only of Aśoka's moral empire but also of his political empire. Often historians dismiss these ideas just by seeing them as a mechanism which was used by Aśoka for consolidation of empire or as a means of gaining legitimacy. But these ideas should be studied in a more nuanced manner as these ideas give us a glimpse of how Aśoka himself was seeing his empire. Through these very ideas we come to know how different Aśoka was and how ahead he was of his time. Once these ideas are studied independently, without attaching them to the concepts of legitimacy or without seeing them as a mechanism for consolidation, one will realize how radical these ideas were when placed in the context of that period and then one will realize that Aśoka was indeed one of the greatest emperors.

While studying history one should be very careful about the fact that whose history are we studying after all? By studying the sources sponsored by the state one will come to know about a history that the state of that period wants us to know. Thus, a historian should always be very careful in selecting his sources. By studying royal inscriptions and texts one will come to know about the dominant view of the society. It is very easy to reconstruct the history of the ruling elites as we have access to many panegyrics or the *praśastis* but not easy to know the underground realities that means the life the normal

people. This is because no one was actually writing the history of those without power. so what about the beliefs and ideas of the common people? How the common people in the ancient period saw war? What about the many unsung heroes who sacrificed their lives in numerous battles? ‘Great’ kings placed their *praśastis* to glorify their victories in various wars but what about the ordinary soldiers with the help of whom these kings actually became ‘great’?

To know about the ordinary heroes historians can study the various memorial stones scattered all over the Indian subcontinent. It is important to note that hero-stones or memorial stones were erected not only for those who died in battle-field but also for men who gave up their life in an act of heroism, for instance, in defending their village or in cattle-raid etc. Thus, war is only one aspect on which these memorial stones throw light. These hero-stones are generally found in larger numbers in western India, central India and southern India. Fewer hero-stones are found in northern and eastern India.<sup>72</sup> There is no clarity regarding the origin of hero-stones. Some historians like Srinivasan, Sontheimer and Thapar connect it with the Menhirs of the megalithic culture.

These hero-stones or other memorial stones tell us how the common people memorialised their local heroes. Romila Thapar has shown how the form of hero-stones changed over time from simple hero-stones to more elaborate ones.. She related this change with the changing status of the hero, but this can't be said with certainty. Hero-stones are a subject which have been neglected for long by art historians or archaeologists but to get a more richer account one should also incorporate such sources which tell us about the common beliefs and practices. In the simplest hero stones, hero is shown

holding a bow and arrow or a sword. In the case of a hero of higher status he is shown riding a horse. In later period more elaborate hero stones began to emerge. These hero-stones contained many scenes depicted in different panels. Often these hero-stones are read from top to bottom or from bottom to top. Generally the panels contained the depiction of the battle and then in the next panel hero is shown to be taken to the heaven by the *apsaras* and in the final panel depiction of heaven along with the symbols of the religious sect to which the hero belonged are found, for instance a *linga* will be depicted if the hero is a *Shiva* worshipper. Then the symbols of sun and moon is depicted on these hero stones to symbolise that the fame of the hero will last till eternity. Sometimes a brief inscription is found with these hero-stones, giving little information about the hero.

Thus, different ideas were attached with war in ancient India. As it is seen in *Mahābhārata* that it is a king's duty (*dharma*) to fight for his people. Moreover, a warrior attains heaven by dying on the battle-field and hence he should always be ready to fight. *Kṛṣṇa* says to *Arjuna* that by not fighting in the battle he will bring dishonour (*akirti*) to himself. In *Mahabharata*, especially in the *Bhagvadgītā*, tension between the *kṣatriyadharmā* and *kuladharmā* also surfaces. but while studying the *Aśokan* edicts one encounters completely different set of ideas related to war. *Aśoka* was a king who did not glorify wars rather he refrains from fighting wars. War was not central to his political theory. He was more concerned for the welfare of his people, in helping them to attain heaven by following *dhamma*. Whereas through the hero-stones one gets to know about the popular beliefs and ideas, and how ordinary soldiers who died in battle-field were memorialized by common

people. These stones tell us about a different aspect of war, how common people saw war and who were the ‘heroes’ for them and how they choose to keep their memory alive. By looking at the various important sources from ancient Indian history we get a very different meaning of the word “battle”. The ideas related to war were completely different in the Mahabharata, and didn’t peer with the ideas of war with that of the Aśoka and the hero stones. So, these ideas related to war in ancient India are one of the most interesting, diverse and vibrant ones in the context of that period.

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