

## AN APPETITE FOR WAR BUT NO PLACE FOR PEACE

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

News has just beamed on television screens that Putin has called off the war, expressed remorse at what he has done, deeply regretted the horror he unleashed. He has also publicly apologised for mass murders and for the suffering he has caused to survivors. This has a tremendous impact on other modern warrior politicians. George Bush and Tony Blair both apologise for the devastation they caused in Iraq. Suddenly, we, humans, are on the verge of a dramatic, revolutionary change in our perspective on the world and the way we think about ourselves. This is a genuine step towards a peaceful world; one in which wars have no place and violent conquests are a thing of the past.

I have allowed my utopian imagination to take flight despite an ongoing brutal war that impacts the entire world — hardly a good time for moral self-indulgence. Yet, I feel justified because something like this has occurred at least once when around 260 BCE, Ashoka famously renounced war and conquest. Ordinary people have railed against war ever since. Massive popular protests against wars have been witnessed in our own times. But there is no other instance, to my knowledge, when a conqueror denounces his own actions and takes humankind in a new moral direction.

It took a cataclysmic act to transform Ashoka. For until then, he was himself a follower of the warrior ethic. In pre-Ashokan elite culture, hyper masculine virtues were eulogised. In the Rig Veda, Indra, the god of sky, rain and thunder, who, being strong and violent, is also the god of war. Blessed with a muscular physique and terrifying demeanour, he, through sheer brawn, is able to push apart the world into two halves (heaven and earth), release primordial waters, split open the cosmic mountain so as to free imprisoned sunlight and cattle. With his *ojas*, a Sanskrit word signifying both physical strength and the power to dominate, Indra pulverises rivals. To politically subjugate the enemy, he happily destroys, crushes, splits apart, slays, and breaks his spirit. Real men take Indra, the most important Vedic god, as the role model and are called *ra* (“big/strong man; champion”). They are skilled in horse and chariot combat. They flex muscles in cattle raiding expeditions and glorify warfare. Here, violence and conquest are a way of life. Invasion of someone else’s territory and its occupation are considered entirely legitimate.

Ashoka himself followed this ethic until the conquest of Kalinga when the scale of wanton destruction, the displacement of 1,50,000 people, and the death of at least 1,00,000, left him distraught and changed his perspective. “On conquering Kalinga, the Beloved of the Gods (Ashoka) felt remorse, for, when an independent country is conquered, the slaughter, death, and deportation of the people is extremely grievous... all survivors... suffer violence, murder, and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate to have escaped its direct impact suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and relatives.” Thus, the war had tragic consequences for practically every resident of Kalinga. He goes on to say, “even if a thousandth of that many were to be slaughtered or deported today, it would have weigh heavily on his mind”.

Romila Thapar rightly notes that ‘the regret and remorse at the suffering in Kalinga is not the regret of a man moved by a passing emotion, but the meaningful contrition of a man who was consciously aware of the sorrow he had caused’. Thenceforth, Ashoka publicly denounced the glorification of conquest and dismissed the idea that fame and glory are goods in themselves. The only kind of fame and glory he wished for is one that is achieved by obeying and following the Dhamma, i.e. public and political morality.

From now on, central to the king's Dhamma is *Sarvajana, sarvalokahita* (welfare of all living beings in this world and hereafter). War and conquest upset the physical security of humans as well as the valid pursuit of these goods. Therefore, these must be eschewed. True glory lies in elevating life-sustaining goods of ordinary persons above power and conquest. Thus, by formulating Dhamma, Ashoka attempts to reshape the Brahmana-kshatriya masculine culture in its entirety. By rejecting the warrior ethic, Ashoka launched a radically new vision of kingship in which violence became a contingent rather than a necessary, constitutive feature.

In Ashoka's ethic, wars, organised violence between or against groups, bring chaos and devastation. They do not spring from human nature nor are they intrinsic to the human condition. They stem from insatiable greed and gargantuan ambition. Although it is hard to imagine a world without anger and aggression, or conflict-free human condition, multiple ways exist to manage and contain them. Large-scale violence and war are avoidable.

Yet, the human species refuses to learn. Alternatives to organised violence stare us in the face but powerful rulers carry on regardless. Worse, they invariably justify their cruelty, offer puerile rationalisations and incessantly reinforce the belief that war is a part of human nature and violence ingrained in our DNA. A subtler justification of war points to the good results it begets. Did not the position of women improve after the Second World War? Did war not get Europe its welfare state? Did it not improve longevity by improvements in education, technology and medicine? These arguments are absurd. Of course, bad things have unintended consequences that may in the long run be good for us. But that is not reason enough to aim to bring about the bad. We must seek out the best peaceful alternatives to secure the good. In any case, we cannot forget that wars are instigated by strong, ambitious men to intimidate the weak into giving up something generally valuable. Wars bring devastation to the many in order to bring enormous material gains to the few. It is therefore painful to see our elected governments pay vacuous lip service to peace. At international fora we condemn acts of war and pontificate on their futility. But in the same breath we ridicule peace makers as effeminate. Our public discourse continues to be replete with the glorification of machismo.

Ironically, human awareness against the inevitability of war has grown at a time when the frequency and scale of war have increased exponentially. The 20th century can be aptly described as the Age of Wars with the first quarter of the 21st century already an extension of the 20th century. I will not be surprised if not a single day in the last 100 odd years has passed without large-scale violence and destruction in one or the other part of the world. And not a single year since the so-called 'long peace' has passed in which the most powerful countries in the world have not bombed one or the other of their perceived enemy. Ordinary people in some or the other region of the world have suffered its brutal consequences long after formal war is over. It is more than 2,000 years since we developed a well-articulated moral consciousness against war. But humanity is nowhere near walking the talk.

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