

Kalinga War

The Kalinga war was a conflict between the Mauryan Empire under Ashoka and the state of Kalinga. Kalinga comprises present day states of Odisha and south-eastern Andhra Pradesh.

As per available information, it was one of the deadliest conflicts in ancient India and the scale of the violence prompted Asoka to give up military conquests for the foreseeable future.

The Kalinga War is an important topic in the Ancient Indian History segment of the IAS Exam.

Background of the Kalinga War

The Mauryan Empire by the time of Chandragupta Maurya's passing had comprised most of modern-day India with its southern reaches and Kalinga remaining independent.

Kalinga had a sound geographical location with trade routes leading to Southeast Asia. It had many important ports and a strong navy. A powerful state on the fringes of the Mauryan Empire would be problematic as it could disrupt the communication lines between the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra and its holdings in the central Indian peninsula.

Kalinga was once under the rule of the Nanda Empire until it fell in 321 BC. Chandragupta Maurya had tried to conquer the state, but failed to do so. His grandson Ashoka would continue the conquest of Kalinga upon coming to the throne.

Facts about the Kalinga War

- The panic of war completely changed the personality of Ashoka. He felt great regret for the killings of the war. He left the policy of aggression and adopted the policy for the welfare of people and animals.
- Ashoka sent ambassadors of peace to the Greek kingdoms in west Asia and several other countries.

Events of the Kalinga War

There are limited sources about the exact nature and events about the Kalinga War. What can be ascertained is that the level of violence and casualties were proportionally high. As per the Rock Edicts of Ashoka, one lakh people were killed in this war, several lakhs perished and a lakh and a half were taken prisoners.

Although the numbers may seem like an exaggeration, it can be determined that the war had a lasting impact on Kalinga. Although it is not known exactly when the war began, it was completed in the 8th year of Ashoka's reign in 261 BC.

According to Megasthenes, the Greek historian at the court of Chandragupta Maurya, the ruler of Kalinga had a powerful army comprising infantry, cavalry and elephants.

Aftermath of the Kalinga War

The Kalinga War had a profound effect on Ashoka. Most probably in the annals of ancient Indian history, it is the only war which led to a would-be conqueror to give up his sword.

The Kalinga War prompted Ashoka, already a non-engaged Buddhist, to devote the rest of his life to ahimsa (non-violence) and to dharma-Vijaya (victory through dharma). Following the conquest of Kalinga, Ashoka ended the military expansion of the empire and began an era of more than 40 years of relative peace, harmony, and prosperity.

While in the short-run Ashoka's policy of peace brought harmony to the empire, in the long run it crippled its ability to defend itself from external threats. The long neglect of the army under Ashoka would be one of the factors that led to the eventual fall of the Mauryan Empire following his death in 232 BC