

## THE BUDDHIST ETHICS AND POLITY: A STUDY ON ASOKA EDICTS

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### Abstract

*The Mauryan Empire reached its height during King Asoka's regime from around 269 to 232 B.C.E. after a brutal and bloody battle of Kalinga. The War of Kalinga proved to be a turning point for Asoka, since, then after, he rejected violence and embraced Buddhism. The history of Asoka and his towering personality remain hidden for more than 700 years after his demised. It was in the 19 century, British civil servants and officers not only rediscovered Buddhism but also many legendary histories and biographies. One such legendary personality was the most powerful and exemplary king Asoka.*

*His edicts are the historical documents about his rule, his administration and the society existing at that time. At present we have information about more than 33 major and minor edicts built by Asoka spread all over India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. The Asokan edicts are mainly inscribed on rocks, stone pillars and walls of the caves and are concern with his administrative reforms and the moral principles recommended to the common people at large. These edicts can be broadly classified on the basis of its content or inscriptions into four categories namely edicts concerning about the Buddhist values and ethics that is about the teaching of Buddha regarding how to live arighteous and moral life. The second category of the edicts talks about the welfare of the people and the administrative measures taken by the King Asoka to look after his people. The third category of the edicts is all about the fair justice, equality in treatment in court and jails and the fourth category of edicts are the assurance by the King Asoka to the public about his duty to protect them from the foreign invaders.*

*Why King Asoka erected these edicts? What was the purpose of these edicts? Firstly, he was a ruler of the vast empire with many provinces which he had to look after. Secondly he was desirous of imbibing the teaching of Buddha without imposing on the people. As a king, it was not possible for him to visit all his territories hence; he erected pillars, raised stone slabs and carved out his proclamations. This had brought to him closer to the common people and kept continues rapport with them. As a King he was personally in touch with his subjects instead of depending on and handing them over to his administrative staff. In a rock edict at Kalinga he said, "All men are my children," whereas in another edict he said, "King is just like a father". This shows his personal involvement with the people and their welfare (Murti and Aaiyangar, 1950).*

*The present paper is an attempt to study, revisit and highlight the principles of Buddhist ethics that had a great influenced on the personality of King Asoka, his polity and administration and his contribution to the Indian culture and civilisation.*

**Keywords:** Asoka, Buddhist Ethics and Asoka edicts.



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## I. Introduction

King Aśoka, the third monarch of the Mauryan dynasty in the third century B.C., was the first ruler of a unified India and one of the greatest political figures of all time. After he embraced the teachings of the Buddha, he transformed his polity from one of military conquest to one of Dharmavijaya -victory by righteousness and truth. By providing royal patronage for the propagation of Buddhism both within and beyond his empire, he helped promote the metamorphosis of Buddhism into a world religion that spread peacefully across the face of Asia.<sup>1</sup> If we look at the nature of Buddhism at the time of Asoka it appears that Buddhism was a heterodoxy in relation to Brahmanism. There was a clear cut distinction between the two. The philosophers were divided between the Brahmins and the Shraman's. A passage from the Patanjali indicates a relationship between the two as hostile by comparing it with the relationship compared to that of snake and mongoose.<sup>2</sup> King Asoka remained mystery in the Indian history for more than 700 years after his passing away. The stories of his valour and generosity were found in Sri lankan literature particularly chronicle Mahavansa. But the Indian mainstream literature has deliberately and intentionally ignored the King Asoka and his greatness. Romila Thapar has elaborately explains the positions of Brahmanical literature and the literature of the shramana traditions on Asoka. She observed that-

In the puranic text of the Brahmins, Aśoka occurs merely as an undistinguished name in a list of Mauryan kings. From the Brahmanical point of view the Mauryas were patrons of heretical sects such as the Jainas, Ājīvikas, and Buddhists and therefore little time and space was wasted on them. But in the traditions of the so-called heretical sects, these kings are depicted as major patrons. Thus the Jaina tradition associates Candragupta Maurya with the major events of the early history of the Jaina *sangha*. A parallel portrayal is given of the association of Aśoka with the Buddhist *sangha* in the Buddhist tradition.<sup>3</sup>

Stories about this king, differing greatly in details were available in the chronicles in Sri Lanka and Chinese texts. They told of an exceptionally cruel and ruthless prince who had many of his brothers killed in order to seize the throne, who was dramatically converted to Buddhism and who ruled wisely and justly for the rest of his life. None of these stories were

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<sup>1</sup> Seneviratna Anuradha(1994) in his preface to a edited book, " King Asoka and Buddhism,"

<sup>2</sup> Thapar Romila(1994), PP. 16-17

<sup>3</sup> Thapar Romila (1994) in her article Asoka and Buddhism as reflected in the Asokan studies.

taken seriously.<sup>4</sup> However, 19<sup>th</sup> century marked the important milestones in the history of India and history of Asia too. The British rule in India paved a way for new look at India's ancient history and culture. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century Asokan inscriptions in the form of rock edicts and pillars were found by the British historians and archeologist all over India and outside India like Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan and Bangladesh. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century most of his edicts were deciphered and the identity of Asoka was established. In the beginning historian thought that the edicts are all about King Asoka's assertions and faith in Buddhism. But when these edicts were examined more analytically it was found that there were few edicts which were directly related to Buddhism and many others were actually address either to public lay people or to his administrative staff regarding their duties towards the welfare of the people. According to historian Romila Thaper<sup>5</sup> these inscriptions can be categorized as those which are directed to the Buddhist Saṅgha and which are fewer in number, and those which are addressed to the people at large and which constitute the majority of the edicts. The latter category includes what are referred to as the Minor Rock Inscriptions, the Major Rock Inscriptions, and the two Separate Edicts at Kalinga.

### **Asoka in the Mainstream Indian Tradition and Literature**

It is regrettable but true that the mainstream Indian tradition and literature is devoid of historical sense. Consequently conscious works of history are virtually non-existent. The nearest to a historical record are the Purāṇas The Purāṇas record hardly anything on Aśoka other than the "prophecy" that he would succeed Vindusāra /Bindusāra and thus be the third monarch of the Mauryan Dynasty with a reign of 36 years.<sup>6</sup> Romila Thapar (1983) argues and points out to the fact that the work of Aśoka as a monarch was almost erased from Indian history and thought cannot be overlooked. The political value of Aśoka's ideals was successfully buried in the oblivion of the past.... No later Indian king of any standing tried consciously to adopt these principles as the basis of his policy."<sup>7</sup>

### **Asoka in Vansa Literature in Sri Lanka**

The two major Sri Lankan Chronicles, the *Dīpavaṃsa* (fourth century) and the *Mahāvaṃsa* (fifth/sixth century); The *Samantapāsādikā* — the *Vinaya Commentary* by Buddhaghosa (fifth century); *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* or *Mahāvaṃsa Ṭīkā* (circa tenth century); And a great number of Pali and Sinhala chronicles dealing with the history of relics, stūpas,

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<sup>4</sup> S Dhammika(1994)

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, P. 16

<sup>6</sup> GurugeW. P. Ananda(1994)

<sup>7</sup> Thapar Romila(1983)

the Bodhi Tree, etc., loosely called the Vāṃsa literature. Despite variations in detail, all these contain a fairly consistent account of Aśoka and his immediate predecessors.

### **Asoka of the Northern Buddhist Sources**

In contrast to the relative silence of the secular and Hindu sources of India, the literatures of the Northern Schools of Buddhism in Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan are replete with works in which Aśoka figures quite prominently. The earliest among them could have come into being between 150 and 50 B.C. When the Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hien, Hiuen-tsang and I-tsing toured various parts of India, they not only visited shrines still believed to be constructed by Aśoka, saw pillars with inscriptions attributed to him. Because of the Avadānas, Aśoka must have occupied a special place of veneration among Chinese Buddhists. As late as 1021 A.C., Chaing Hsia-pias in his hymn in honor of Buddhagayā Vihāra complimented Aśoka- “As the righteous emperor who lived in the right perception of the truth of the religion of the Buddha and as the great builder of Buddhist shrines in India whose noble fame travelled far and wide.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Rediscovery of King Asoka in modern India by Europeans**

Aśoka has remained in vivid living memory in the minds of every successive generation of Theravāda Buddhists outside India; He was virtually forgotten in the land of his birth and remained for at least a millennium an unknown and unrecalled name until 1750. An Asokan inscription was first discovered when Padre Tieffenthaler saw at Delhi fragments of the Delhi-Mirath Pillar. With the rediscovery and translation of Indian literature by European scholars in the 19th century, it was not just the religion and philosophy of Buddhism that came to light, but also its many legendary histories and biographies. Amongst this class of literature, one name that came to be noticed was that of Asoka. The year 1837 is memorable in the history of Asokan scholarship. It witnessed the first successful reading of an Asokan inscription, the Delhi-Topra Pillar Edict, by James Prinsep, who published his reading and translation of the inscription in JASB, Vol. vi. In 1838, further progress in Asokan studies was achieved by Prinsep who made the first comparative study of the two Asokan inscriptions at Girnar and Dhauri, He discovered their identity in script, language, and contents, and deciphered and published them with translations in JASB, Vol. vii. At present we have two Aśokas: the Aśoka known to modern historians through his inscriptions, and The Aśoka of Buddhist tradition as we have seen before.

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<sup>8</sup> Cunningham Alexander, Mahabodhi, P. 70 quoted in Barua, P. 30  
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## II. Review of Literature

Richard Gombrich in his article entitled, “Asoka- The great Upasaka Aśoka”, points out that King Asoka have left a large number of inscriptions on rocks and pillars. He dictated his edicts to scribes in Pāṭaliputta and had them carved in conspicuous places throughout his vast kingdom. The edicts record not only a personality of Asoka but a history and a concept of rule unique not merely in Indian but perhaps in world history. Almost all of Aśoka’s inscriptions are about *dhamma*. By this he did not mean specifically Buddhism, but righteousness as he understood it. And it is clear that his understanding was greatly influenced by Buddhism. 24

Romila Thapar It is rare in Indian history to have access to the personalized edicts of a king. These inscriptions can be categorized as those which are directed to the Buddhist Saṅgha and which are fewer in number, and those which are addressed to the people at large and which constitute the majority of the edicts. 25

The policy of *dhamma* was also significant from the point of view of bringing administrative reforms. For promotion of the *dhamma* Ashoka created a number of new administrative posts eg., the posts of *dhamma-mahāmātras*, *yutas* and *rājukas*. They were given a protective mission among people of all sects including the brahmins and sramanas. To keep himself informed about all public affairs, specially about the doings of the *mahāmātras* on whom the success of his mission mainly relied, he therefore gave special directions to the reporters or the *prativedakas* that when a matter of urgency comes he must be informed without delay. Through the institution of *dhamma-mahāmātra* he tried to perform the task of betterment and upliftment of the depressed and the neglected sections of the population. According to many historians Ashoka’s policy of *dhamma* was primarily responsible for the disintegration of the Mauryan empire. Rhys Davids though he admires Ashoka as a great leader nevertheless holds him responsible for the disintegration of empire. To quote him, “with all his evident desire to do the very best possible things, and always to be open to the appeals of the subjects he looked upon as his children, he left his empire in such a condition that it soon disintegrated and crumbled away. 26

D.D. Kosambi maintains that “the Ashokan edicts clearly provide the first constitutional check against the crown, the first Bill of Rights for the citizens. This is made clear by the special instruction to officials that the edicts were to be read out and carefully explained to large public gatherings at least three times a year.”<sup>35</sup>

Dileep Kumar S in his article “A study on Ashoka’s inscriptions with the special focus on Maski Rock edict”, **argues** that though the inscription is dated around 256 BC, it took over 2,100 years for it to see the light of the modern world. For over two millennia, it has withstood the vagaries of weather and onslaughts of nature. The site Maski according to the author is located in Maski village that lies on the bank of Maski river at Lingasugur taluka of Raichur district of the state of Karnataka came into prominence with the discovery of a minor rock edict of Emperor Ashoka by C. Beadon in 1915. It was the first edict of Emperor Ashoka that contained the name Ashoka in it instead of the earlier edicts that referred him as *Devanampriya*, *Priyadarshi*. This edict was important to conclude that many edicts found earlier in the Indian sub-continent in the name of *Devanampriya*, *Priyadarshi*, all belonged to Emperor Ashoka. The inscription remains a dharma shasana, an edict exhorting people to follow the tenets of Buddhism. 36

Anirban Dash is an expert on ancient Indian scripts in his book on Brahmi script entitled ‘Iyam Dhammalipi’ opined that that the script used in the Asokan edicts is ‘Dhammalipi’ as the evidences of the same can be found in Asokan inscriptions itself issued by King Asoka. Dr Anirban Dash further argued that the Asokan scripts were wrongly identified as Brahmi on the basis of Chinese translation of Lalitvistara and with the help of Chinese Buddhist encyclopedia. In his book he has provided brief history and the development of the scripts during the Asokan era to establish his premise that Brahmi lipi is actually a Dhammalipi. He has also given a complete list of all kinds of Asoka’s edicts with statewise and countrywise classification along with language and scripts used in them. 37

### **III. Objectives & Methodology of the Study**

#### **Objectives**

- 1) To study and examine the nature and content of the Asokan edicts found in India and outside the India.
- 2) To study and analyze the content of inscriptions in the light of its typology, purpose and object.
- 3) To assess and ascertain the ethical, social, political and historical importance of Asokan edicts.

#### **Methodology**

This study is based on a primary sources and secondary sources of data. The primary data is mainly derived from the original Ashokan inscriptions both rocks and pillar edicts and also some other isolated inscriptions found in India and the neighboring countries like

Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nepal. The secondary data for the present study is taken from various previous studies and books related to Asoka's edicts, his biographies authored by eminent scholars. The articles published in journals were also referred so as to get the insight of the subject under study. This is a qualitative study and the researcher has used a content analysis research design so as to study and analyze the textual data gathered from the various Asokan edicts. The textual data so collected was categorized into various sections like Dhamma related texts, Textual data related to Asoka social and political reforms, his administrative orders to the servants of his regime and the textual data about his personal life. After the categorization of the data the same was analyzed keeping in mind the objectives of the study.

Keeping the Abstract aside, the present study is organized into six sections. The first section of the study is an introductory section and it introduces the subject matter to the readers in a historical context. The second section of the study is about review of related literature. The third section of the study focuses on objectives and the methodology to achieve the set objectives. The fourth section of the study deals with the Result and discussion on the textual data along with the analysis. The fifth section of the study talks about the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the available data. The sixth and final part of the study is dedicated to the Annexures followed by Bibliography. The present study includes two annexures in the end. Annexure I indicating the state wise list of all types of Asokan edicts found in India and the Annexure II, indicating the list of Asokan inscriptions discovered in the neighboring countries outside India.

A great emphasis is laid upon the paternal principle of government in his Edicts : "All men are my children ; and, just as I desire for my children that they may enjoy every kind of prosperity and happiness both in this world and in the next, so also do I desire the same for all men " (Kalinga Edict II). He wants the newly-subdued Kalingas " to grasp the truth that ' the king is to us as a father; he loves us even as he loves himself; we are to the king even as his children ' " (ibid). But this abiding sense of parental responsibility for his people was not confined to the king alone. It belonged to his agents, too, to whom he committed the care of his people "as a man would make over his child to a skilful nurse and, feeling confident, says to himself: ' The skilful nurse is eager to care for the happiness of my child ' ; even so my Governors have been created for the welfare and happiness of the country" (Pillar Edict IV) .  
p.48

He was an ideal public servant, the most hard working of all his officials. He gave himself to public business at all hours and places. Says he in Rock Edict VI :. " A long period has elapsed during which in the past administrative business or information was not attended to at all hours. So\_by me the arrangement has been made that at all times, when I am eating, or in the harem, or in the bedroom, or in my ranches, or even in the place of religious instruction, or in my pleasure grounds, everywhere the reporting officials should make known to me the people's affairs. In all places I shall attend to public business." He says further [ibid.] : "In ever feel satisfaction in my exertions and dispatch of business. For work I must for the welfare of all the folk ; and of that, again, the root is energy and the dispatch of business ; for nothing is more essential than the welfare of all the folk." P. 50

The sovereign of a large empire, Asoka also recognised his duty of touring the country touring not for sport or pleasure as his predecessors did, but for " the inspection of the country and the people " (jdnapadasya janasya darsanam) (R.E. VIII). But his empire was so extensive that he could not visit all its parts, as is apparent from a passage in the Rock Edict XIV, where he assumes that in some of his Edicts "something has been written incompletely by blunders of the writer."

The emperor, besides having them indelibly engraved on the rocks, ordered that they be recited publicly " at the beginning of each season of four months, (i.e., each of the three seasons, hot ,rainy and cold) on the Tisya day, (i.e., when the moon is in that constellation) " (K.E. II), nay, even once a month onthe Tisya day, and in the intervals between the Tisya days,and on fit occasions even to a single person [K.E. II].

The sovereignty of the smaller states and weaker peoples was respected as a matter of principle. To the many " unsubdued borderers"of the empire went forth the healing message : " The king,desires that they should not be afraid of him but should trust him, and would receive from him not sorrow but happiness " [K.E. II]. Nor was subjection forced on theruder peoples on the plea of civilising them : " Even uponthe forest folk in his dominions His Sacred Majesty lookskindly" [R.E. XIII]. So rang through the country themessage, loud and clear, repeated on rock and pillar, themessage of freedom, of peace on earth and goodwill amongmen. Silenced was the war-drum : the bhen-ghosa wasdrowned in the dharma-ghosa ! [R.E. IV]. P.58

His international relations were governed by principles that still remain to be recognised. The barriers that divide nations could not stand before his sense of universal brotherhood. Thus we find this good king, centuries ahead of his times, carrying on welfare



work among the citizens of other states by the expenses borne by his own state ! [R.E. II]. P. 59.

### Conclusions

In 1837, James Prinsep succeeded in deciphering an ancient inscription on a large pillar stone in Delhi. Several others pillars and rocks had been known for sometimes and had attracted the curiosity of scholars. The pillar at Delhi was one of the series edicts issued by King Asoka calling himself "Beloved of the Gods, King Piyadasi". In the following decades more and more edicts by the same name were discovered and a more complete picture of this man began to emerge. Gradually, the scholars started thinking that King Piyadasi might be the King Asoka so often praised in the Buddhist legends. Finally, it was in 1915 another edict actually mentioning the name Asoka was discovered at Maski in Karnataka and identification was confirmed having been forgotten for 700 years. One of the greatest men in history became known to the world once again. It took a hundred years from the discovery of fragments of the Delhi-Meerut Pillar Inscription in 1750 by Father Tieffenthaler to the publication of a representative collection of edicts and inscriptions in Vol. I of *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* by Alexander Cunningham in 1879.

To the development of a more spiritually based political system We have no way of knowing how effective Asoka's reforms were or how long they lasted but we do know that monarchs throughout the ancient Buddhist world were encouraged to look to his style of government as an ideal to be followed. King Asoka has to be credited with the first attempt to develop a Buddhist polity with Buddhist ethics. Today, with widespread disillusionment in prevailing ideologies and the search for a political philosophy that goes beyond greed (capitalism), hatred (communism) and delusion (dictatorships led by "infallible" leaders), Asoka's edicts may make a meaningful contribution.

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**TABLE: 1: STATEWISE DISTRIBUTION OF ASHOKAN INSCRIPTIONS**

Sr No.	State	Place/places	Type of Edict
1	Andhra Pradesh	1. Rajulmandgiri 2. Yeryagudi	Minor Rock Edict
2	Uttar Pradesh	1 Aharaura 2 Meerut 3 Sarnath 4 Kosambi 5. Ilhabad	Minor Rock Edict Pillar Edict ----/----- ----/----- ----/-----
3	Karnataka	1 Bramagiri 2 Jating-Rameshwar 3 Siddhapur 4 Maski 5 Gavi Math 6. Palkigundu 7. Nitthur 8 Udegolam 9 Sannati	All Minor Rock Edict
4	Bihar	1 Sahasram 2 Lauriya(Aareraj) 3. Nandgad 4. Rampurva 5 Barabar	Minor Rock Edict Pillar Edict ----/----- Cave Edict
5	Madhya Pradesh	1 Rupanath 2 Gurjara 3 Pangurariya 4 Sanchi	Minor Rock Edict -----/----- Minor Pillar Edict Pillar Edict
6	Odisha	1 Dhauli 2 Jogad	Rock Edict Rock Edict
7	Gujarat	1 Girnar ( ! to 14)	All Rock Edicts
8	Delhi	1 Delhi	Minor Rock Edict
9	West Bengal/Kolkotta	1 Bhairat	Minor Rock Edict
10	Maharashtra	1 Sopara	Pillar Edict
11	Haryana	1 Topara	Pillar Edict
12	Himachal Prradesh	1 Kalasi	Rock Edict

**TABLE: 2:COUNTRYWISE DISTRIBUTION OF ASHOKAN INSCRIPTIONS**

Sr No	Country	Place	Type of Edicts
13	Pakistan	1 Shahabajgadi 2 Mansehara	Rock Edicts
14	Afghanistan	1 Laghaman 2 Shiri-ye- Kuna	Minor Rock Edict Rock Edict
15	Nepal	1 Rummeendei (Lumbini) 2 Nigliva	Pillar Edict Pillar Edict

**The list of Ashokan inscriptions grouped according to their subject matter and chronology they seems to follow-**

**1. Fourteen Major Rock Edicts**

A series of 14 major Rock Edicts of Ashoka inscribed on large boulders were discovered at the following eight places:- Girnar (Gujrat), Kalsi(Dehradun), Yerragundi(Andhra Pradesh), Mansehra (Pakistan), Sapara (Maharashtra), Shahpazgarhi(Pakistan), Jaugada(Orrisa) and Dhauri(Orrisa)

**2. Minor Rock Edicts:** These minor Rock Edicts and inscriptions have been found Siddapura, Jatinga-Rameshwara, Bairat, Brahmagiri, Maski, Sahasaram, Rupnath, Govinath and Palaigunda.

Northern Edicts Of the two northern Edicts, the one found at Taxila is written in Aramaic script and the other found at Kandhar is bilingual, being inscribed in Greek and Aramic.

**3. Bhabru Edict:** It is inscribed on a boulder, now in Calcutta, which was removed from the top of a hill at Bairat.

**4. Seven Pillar Edicts:** Seven pillar Edicts exists at Allahabad- Kosam, Delhi-Topara, Delhi –Meerut, Rampurva, Laurya- Araraja, Lauriya – Nandangarh and Nigali – Sagar. These edicts contain administrative instructions to governors, subject of Dhamma and enumerate the regulations regarding the promotion of Ahimsa.

**5. Minor Pillar Edicts:** They are three in number. They lay down the punishment for schismatics, so that the Sangha may be united and long duration. The minor Pillar Edicts have been found at Sanchi, Saranath and Kaushambhi. The fourth minor Pillar Edict is known as the Queen's Edict.

**6. Two Kalinga Rock Edicts:** Two Kalinga Edicts are special supplements to the series of fourteen Rock Edicts. These Edicts are found at Dhauri and Jaugada. These two Kalinga Edicts laid down the principles on which the newly conquered province of Kalinga was to be governed.

**7. Two Commemorative Pillar Inscriptions:** They have been found at Rumminei(Lumbini) and at Nigliva, in the Nepalese Tarai. These inscriptions definitely prove that Ashoka went on a pilgrimage of the holy places connected with the life of Buddha.

**8. Cave Inscriptions:** Three cave inscriptions of Ashoka have been found in the Barbara Hills near Gaya in Bihar. The cave inscriptions were engraved between 257 and 250 B.C. These inscriptions tell us that these caves were dedicated by Ashoka to the monks of Ajivikas sect.

**Fig.2. Ashok's Empire and inscriptions**

