

King Aśoka's Right Approach to Buddhism: A Critique

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Abstract

Aśoka was a great emperor of Ancient India. He was very famous for his nice deeds. Besides, emperor Aśoka lived from 304 to 232 BCE and was the third ruler of the Indian Mauryan Empire, the largest ever in the Indian subcontinent and one of the world's largest empires at its time. He ruled from 268 BCE to 232 BCE and became a model of kingship in the Buddhist tradition. King Aśoka promoted Buddhist expansion by sending monks to surrounding territories to share the teachings of the Buddha. A wave of conversion began, and Buddhism spread not only through India, but also internationally. Aśoka pleaded for tolerance of different religious sects in an attempt to create a sense of harmony. The policy of Dhamma also laid stress on non-violence, which was to be practiced by giving up war and conquests and also as a restraint on the killing of animals. He sent Buddhist missionaries to many nations to expand Buddhism, which preached peace. He started a monetary system which involved entire India. He dug many wells, planted trees and levied taxes many times. Besides, Asoka built thousands of Stupas and Viharas for Buddhist followers. One of his Stupas, the Great Sanchi Stupa, has been declared as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. The Aśoka Pillar at Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India, has a four-lion capital, which was later adopted as the national emblem of the modern Indian Republic. This paper will highlight the major works done by king Aśoka for the propagation of Buddhism.

Keywords: Aśoka, Buddhism, Rock Edict, A Critique.

In fact, Aśoka was a great emperor of the World. He was popularly known as Aśoka the great was a versatile genius and one of the most remarkable personalities in the history of the world. He was at the same time a great conqueror and builder, statesman and administrator, religious and social reformer and philosopher and saint. One of India's greatest emperors, Aśoka reigned over most of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan in the West, to the present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of Assam in the east and as far South as Northern Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. His organization of missions meant for the transformation of a small sectarian creed into a world religion. He eschewed military conquests not after a defeat but after a great victory over the powerful people of Kalinga and pursued a policy of toleration in respect of the neighbouring states in spite of the vast resources of exceptional energy, ability and power of organization and

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his generosity and forbearance were matched only by his sincerity of purpose. King Aśoka's piety and his liberal and impartial dealings with all his subjects irrespective of their caste and creed exercised an ennobling influence on the pious kings of India for many succeeding generations.

King Chandragupta was succeeded by his son Bindusāra (300–272 B. C.), known to the Greeks as Amitraghata. He succeeded in preserving the solidarity of the vast empire inherited from his father and maintaining friendly relations with the Greek king of Western Asia and the latter's neighbours. King Bindhsāra died about 272 B. C. and his throne passed to his illustrious son Aśoka whose coronation, however, took place four years later owing probably to a protected struggle for succession. According to some tradition Aśoka reigned for thirty-seven years possibly counted from the date of his coronation about 269 B.C. A volume of information about Aśoka's career and exploits is available from literary traditions and his own records engraved on rocks and stone pillars.

The Gujjarra and Maski versions of Minor Rock Edict–I are the only two inscriptions of Aśoka, which refer to him by name. Elsewhere in his records, the emperor is generally mentioned as Devānāmpriya Priyadarśī Rājā, i.e., the king who is the beloved of the gods and who glances graciously upon all. Sometimes he is called simply Devānāmpriya or king Priyadarśī. Literary tradition also often refers to Aśoka either as Priyadarśī or as Priyadarśana, i.e. one having an amiable appearance. In his Inscriptions, Aśoka is once represented as the king of Magadha which was the home province of the Maurya emperors, and the city of Pāṭaliputra is indirectly mentioned as his capital in a few cases. But, on several occasions, the inscriptions use the word meaning 'here' to indicate the royal household or the capital city or the entire dominions of Aśoka. In some cases, the empire is mentioned in accordance with an ancient Indian convention, as either the earth or Jambūdvīpa meaning the earth or its part contains Bhārata varṣa. Other cities of the empire mentioned in the inscriptions are: Ujjayinī, Takṣaśilā, Toṣāli, Kauśāmbī and Samāpā, of which the first four were provincial headquarters where viceroys of the royal blood were stationed. It seems that Pāṭaliputra was the headquarters of the Prācyā and Madhyadeśa divisions of ancient Bhāratavarṣa comprising the East Punjab, U. P., Bihar and Bengal. According to tradition, Aśoka himself acted as his father's viceroy at both Ujjayini and Takshasila. The inscription also mentions certain Buddhist holy places visited by the emperor on pilgrimage. They include Lumbinīgrāma in the Nepalese Tarai and Sambodhi or Mahābodhi in the Bihar.

King Aśoka, an adherent of the common Indian religion for about nine years after his coronation, devoted himself in the pursuit and spread of the Buddhistic duties after his conversion into Buddhism in the tenth Regnal year. In Minor Rock Edict III, word dharma is used in the sense of the Buddha's doctrine. But elsewhere it indicates a code of morals preached by Aśoka probably following what he believed to be teachings of Buddha. There is indeed some similarity between Aśoka's teachings and the Buddha's instructions to a householder's son named Śṛgāla as found in the canonical work entitled Dīgha Nikāya. Besides, Buddhist traditions also represent Aśoka as converted to Buddhism as an Upāsaka, i. e. follower of Lord Buddha and as a patron of Buddhism.

As a devotee of Buddha he prohibited cruel shows like bull-fights, athletic combats, bullock cart races, etc. and in place encouraged religious spectacles everywhere. His edicts emphatically state that he prescribed various kinds of slaughter in the twenty-seventh Regnal year. Several animals were not to be killed on a number of days, e. g. on tishya, the 13rd, 14th and 15th days of a fortnight. Every year he ordered the release of prisoners. He built hospitals for animals as also for men throughout his kingdom. Wells and tanks were dug, roads and rest-houses were constructed and on both the sides of the roads, trees (specially the banyan trees being an emblem of Buddhism) were planted so that they might offer shade to the travellers. A separate department of Law (*dharma*) was opened with *dharma-mahāmātya* as its head. The minister for Law looked after the people in respect of law and through his numerous subordinate officers he controlled the morality of the entire state. Not only the Law Officers but the Civil Servants such as the Governors, the block-holders and others were also given powers for the inculcation of the Law of piety.

According to Aśoka, Dharma included avoidance of sins, ample goodness, kindness, charity, truthfulness and cleanness; while sin included fierceness, harshness, anger, arrogance, envy and slanderous habit. Being a Buddhist, he never mentions the name of God in his inscriptions in the usual sense of the term but he has great faith in next life and heaven, an anti-Buddhistic attitude. But he is not clear as to what he meant by next life and heaven. His veteran ministers of the Law were no doubt plunged heart and soul into the preaching of Dharma. He was very proud of the permanent existence of Dharma and that is why he inscribed his sermons on the rocks and pillars. In several cases, Aśoka refers to the Buddha as 'The Lord' and in one case the Buddhist doctrine is mentioned as 'The true faith'. In minor Rock Edict-I, he declares that when the edict was issued, he had been an Upāsaka for more than two years and a half and in intimate association with the Saṅgha, i.e. the Buddhist clergy, for more than one year. Minor Rock Edict III not only refers to his reverence for and faith in the Buddhist Trinity, i.e. the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha, but also prescribes certain religious texts selected by himself, for the study of the Buddhist monks and nuns as well as of the lay followers of the Buddha. Minor Pillar Edict-I contains the text of his order to his officers to the effect that heretical monks and nuns should have to be expelled from the Saṅgha. The Rock Edict VIII and Pillar Inscriptions I-II speak of King Aśoka's pilgrimage to such Buddhist holy places, such as Sambodhi, i.e. modern Bodhagayā, where Lord Buddha obtained Bodhi and Lumbinīgrāma where the Lord was born, as well as to the Stūpa built over the relics of the former Buddha Kanakamuni. The Kalsi and Dhauri rocks bear the figure of an elephant near the inscriptions of Aśoka, which is described respectively as 'the best elephant' and 'the white'.

No doubt Aśoka was a great emperor of World. While the early part of Aśoka's reign was apparently quite blood-thirsty, became a follower of the Buddha's teaching after his conquest of Kalinga on the east coast of India, i.e. the present day states of Orissa and North coastal Andhra-Pradesh. Kalinga was a state that period itself on its sovereignty and democracy. With its monarchical parliamentary democracy it was quite

an exception in ancient Bhārata where there existed the concept of Rājadharmā. Here, Rājadharmā means the duty of the rulers, which was intrinsically entwined with the concept of bravery and Kṣatriya dharmā.

Before Kaliṅga war King Aśoka was originally known as Caṇḍāśoka or the fierce Aśoka owing to his many evil deeds; but afterwards he became famous as Dharmāśoka or the pious Aśoka on account of his innumerable virtuous acts. This has been regarded by scholars as a fabrication due to Buddhists' eagerness to emphasise the effect of one's conversion to their faith which they called the true religion. The rock Edict XIII clearly states how Aśoka became a thoroughly changed man shortly after the famous Kaliṅga war which took place eight year after his coronation, i.e. in the ninth regnal year. The horrors of the war induced him give up the life of an ordinary Indian King which he had been leading and to become an advocate of non-violence and live the life of an exceptionally pious man and a social and religious reformer. Formerly, numerous animals and birds used to be killed in his kitchen for the preparation of curries; he now confined this slaughter to two birds and one animal. He gave up the royal habit of going on hunting excursions and adopted the practice of going on tour of pilgrimage with a view to contacting the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas and the aged for making gifts to them and also for imparting instructions in Dharma to the people of the countryside. His officers were also ordered to set out on tours periodically for the same purpose. He even advised his successors to give up the policy of conquering countries by arms and to try to conquer the hearts of the people of the neighbouring lands by means of benevolent activities and considered this to be the true conquest.

Aśoka's teachings are confined essentially to a practical code of morals and are not based on any special dogma, either metaphysical or theological. King Aśoka understood a number of virtues to constitute his Dharma. These included the least amount of sin and the greatest amount of good done to others as well as compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness. Good conduct, self-control, purity of thought, gratitude and firm devotion are extolled as also the absence of violence, cruelty, anger, vanity and jealousy. The following are some of the virtues strongly recommended by king Aśoka on various occasions: obedience to parents, high personages, elders and the aged; liberality to friends, acquaintances and relatives as well as to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas; abstention from the slaughter of and injury or cruelty to living beings; moderation in regard to expenditure and accumulation of wealth; proper courtesy to relatives, slaves and servants and the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas as well as to the aged, the poor, and the distressed; reverence to the elders, and courtesy and devotion to friends, acquaintances, companions, relatives, slaves and servants. The preaching of these virtues to others, which was recommended both to the poor and the rich, was regarded as highly meritorious. Aśoka preached the practice of these virtues, otherwise called the practices of Dharma, to all classes of people, no matter whether they lived within or outside his dominions. He believed that this would lead to their happiness in this world and in the next. But at the same time he realized that this was not possible to achieve without great effort. He also declared that fear of sin and love of and zeal for Dharma as well as self-examination and obedience to elders were required for reaching the goal.

In addition to these, King Aśoka recommended compassion, reverence, sympathy and truthfulness and condemned cruelty, irreverence, intolerance and falsehood. The virtue on which he laid the greatest emphasis is the regard for the sanctity of life. The other two virtues almost equally emphasized are liberality reverence to all persons deserving of it by reason of rank, age or station. He provided for amenities for animals just as for men and repeatedly advised people to be kind to them and issued orders prohibiting the slaughter of numerous species of birds and beasts including aquatic animals for the preparation of curries for his own household and even banned festive gatherings like synods for religious discussion, which involved no slaughter of animals were allowed. Slaughter of and injuries to animals were also generally prohibited on a number of specific days. Slaughter of animals in sacrifices in the capital city or in the royal household was also banned. He organized among various members of his household a regular system of giving grants to needy persons. He acknowledged the traditional debt a king owes to his subjects in return of one sixth for the production of the fields levied from them as revenue. This of course meant affording them protection. But, in this connection, Aśoka repeatedly speaks of his desire to make the people happy in this world as well as in the next. He goes even further when he declares that his subjects of all the sects and communities were his children. He introduced the system of dispatching people's business at all times and places. Although he was a Buddhist, his attitude was never to disparage other faiths and persecute the votaries of other creeds. Rock Edict XII speaks of his impartial consideration for all sects and his advice to the people of different religious sects and communities to respect one another's creeds. He was definitely against extolling one's own sect and disparaging other sects and recommended restraint of speech in this respect. He also advised all classes of people to live together harmoniously in all parts of his empire. Besides, he also declared that what he wanted was the growth of the essential of their respective Dharma among all men. Such broadness of outlook is indeed remarkable. In Aśoka's opinion, people of all sects have the desire for self control and purity of thought in common. In Pillar Edict VI, he refers to his eagerness to honour people of all sects. He felt that the honouring of other communities would lead to the glorification and promotion of Dharma as well as of all religious sects. He did not discriminate between brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas his superintendents of religious affairs were occupied, according to Rock Edict V and Pillar Edict VIII, with the welfare and happiness of all sects and communities like the Śūdras, Vaiśyas, Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas as well as the Śramaṇas. In the Rock Edict XV, the judicial officers are advised to be free from jealousy, anger, cruelty, hastiness, want of perseverance, laziness and fatigue. He granted three days' respite to prisoners on whom the sentence of death had been passed. The intention was that, during that period, the relatives of the prisoners would plead for their lives to the officers by appealing to the latter's mercy or by adding fresh evidence in the convicts' favour or by paying ransom for their release; but, failing to secure the release of the prisoners by those means, the relatives would console them by observing fasts and giving gifts with a view to securing their happiness in the next world. All these measures were prompted

by Aśoka's anxiety not only for the welfare and happiness of his subjects in this world but also for the popularization of the practices of Dharma among the people so that they might attain happiness in the next world as well. His benevolent activities were counted by Aśoka as practices of Dharma and he hoped that people would emulate him in the performance of pious deeds. He also claims that his propagation of Dharma led to such a considerable increase of virtue among the people that they were capable of associating themselves with the gods.

Besides, in the Pillar Edict VI, Aśoka says that the practice of Dharma among men was promoted by him in two ways, *viz.* by imposing restrictions such as the prohibition of the slaughter of living beings and by exhorting people to live in accordance with the principles of Dharma. But he admits that the second of these two ways was very considerably more effective than the first. Thus, Aśoka seems to be one of the few politicians of the world, who realized that propaganda is more important than legislation in matters relating to the people's inclinations and sentiments. There is no doubt that Aśoka tried to be absolutely impartial in his dealings with different religious communities and never intended to wound the religious feelings of any of them. But he laid special emphasis on the sanctity of animal life and seems to have been against the slaughter of animals even in the name of religion.

Aśoka's inscriptions spread out all over India. It can be broadly divided into two classes, *viz.* those engraved on rocks and those incised on Pillars of stone. The rock inscriptions fall into three groups, *viz.* Minor Rock Edicts, Rock Edicts and Cave Inscriptions. The Pillar inscriptions also may be classified under three subdivisions, *viz.* Minor Pillar Edicts, Pillar Inscriptions and Pillar Edicts. The main Pillar Edicts are seven in number and are located at different places of Northern India. The first six of these are found on six pillars, *viz.* (i) Delhi Pillar No. – 1, (ii) Delhi Pillar No. – 2, (iii) Kausambi Pillar standing now in the Allahabad fort, (iv) Lauria Pillar, (v) Nandangarh Pillar near village Mathia in Champaran, (vi) and Rampurwas Pillar in the same districts. The seventh pillar Edict, getting lion's share among these, is preserved only on Delhi Pillar No.–1. All these Edicts are inscribed in Brahmi scripts, the language being Pali bearing slight provincial variations here and there. These Edicts provide a number of important information about king Aśoka and his activities. Besides, these Edicts proved that Aśoka was a great Ideal Indian King of the Ancient times.

In addition to these, King Aśoka had a lot for the propagation of dharma. The following are the main principles of Aśoka's dhamma: People should live in peace and harmony. Everyone should practice the principle of ahimsa, i.e. non-violence and non-injury to all living beings. People should love one another and display respect and tolerance towards other religious faiths. However, he was certainly a great missionary ruler in the history of the Ancient World. He enthusiastically worked with great devotion for his mission and achieved a great deal at home and abroad. He also brought about the political unification of the country. He also strictly followed a tolerant religious policy.

Finally, it can be said that king Aśoka has contributed many significant contributions to the spread of Buddhism. Some of his contributions are as follows: Architecture: Aśoka built many Stupas, Viharas, Chaityas, Pillars, capitals and also expand the process of inscription writing on rock edicts. No other king recorded; in world history became a nobler conception of kingly duties than Asoka. He tried his utmost to promote their material and moral well-being.

However, it now clear that Aśoka was not only a great king but also a great devotee of Lord Buddha. That is why, it is said that Gautama Buddha and Aśoka are two of the greatest sons of India and the world and their lives and achievements stand among India's best contributors to human civilization.

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