



Aśoka and Buddhism vis-a-vis Personal Faith and *Dhamma* Policy: A Brief Analytical Overview of Epigraphical and Literary Sources

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Abstract

The theme of Aśoka his interesting relationship with Buddhism, along with him being recognised as one of the ablest rulers in ancient India, has long intrigued the historians. Several scholars have attempted plethora of research to attain an authentic understanding of this connection. Accordingly, there has been an ongoing debate around the effect of Buddhism on the administrative policies (broadly termed as *dhamma*) of Aśoka owing to his transitional conversion of personal faith. The abundance of evidence in terms of epigraphical evidence (rock and pillar inscriptions of Aśoka) and literary texts (including but not limited to Sanskrit, Chinese and Buddhist sources) have played the dual role of giving extensive insight into Aśoka's time period while also leading to exaggerated history writing in term of his reign and personality. The latter is largely owing to the fact of Aśoka being revered in Buddhism and elevated to an almost divine status.

However, in recent decades, new research has recognised a distinction between the personal Buddhist faith of Aśoka and his comparatively neutral (as well as tolerant) policy of *Dhamma*. Therefore, the paper attempts to historicise the sources and analyse the exaggerated (later) literary accounts in corroboration with the inscriptions to better understand the actual effect of Buddhism on Aśoka's administrative practices. This brief and comparative analysis will prove useful in attaining a significant insight into the scholarship surrounding the theme of extracting an authentic picture of the relationship between Aśoka and Buddhism.

Keywords: Aśoka and Buddhism, *Dhamma*, Aśokan Inscriptions

Introduction

Aśoka is considered to be one of the most prominent rulers in ancient world history and perhaps the greatest in Ancient Indian history. With information about him available from diverse sources, it was a feast for history students and Aśoka jumped into limelight as a subject matter (and continues to be) of detailed study and analysis. Despite various debates surrounding all the sources and a lack of common conclusion, no sincere scholar can decline the rare magnificence of this person in Ancient India. In the words of Radhakumud Mookerji: "In the annals of kingship, there is scarcely any record, comparable to that of Aśoka, both as a man and as a ruler. To bring out the chief features of his greatness, historians have constituted comparisons between him and other distinguished monarchs in history, eastern and western, ancient and modern, the pagan, Moslem and Christian. In his efforts to establish a kingdom of righteousness after the highest ideals of a theocracy, he has been likened to David and Solomon of Israel in the days of its greatest glory; in his patronage of Buddhism, which helped to transform a local into a world religion, he has been compared to Constantine in relation to Christianity; in his philosophy and piety he recalls Marcus Aurelius; he was Charlemagne in the extent of his empire and, to some extent, in the methods of his administration too, while his Edicts "rugged, uncouth, involved, full of repetitions" read like the speeches of Oliver Cromwell in their mannerisms. Lastly, he has been compared to Khalif Omar and Emperor Akbar, whom also he resembles in certain respects.": Mookerji, himself, proceeded to compare Aśoka to King Arthur, King Alfred and King St. Louis of France as regards the mass of tradition which had gathered round

his name. The comparisons do not end with kings and emperors. A Sri Lankan writer went further when he said, "Aśoka was the Lenin of Buddhism, as he was the first to translate the Buddha's Way of Life into a polity." 56 Whatever these comparisons were expected to convey by their ingenious authors, they have all proved to be both inadequate and misleading as regards the assessment of Aśoka's legitimate place in history. They were not meant to be taken as sound, objective scholarly evaluations. (Guruge 1994, 217)

Aśoka's legacy, like many other significant political personalities of Ancient Indian history, were lost in India's later Islamic history owing to plunderers invasions and the struggle of establishing new cultural, ethical practices with advent of Islamic history. The European orientalist like William Jones, James Prinsep, etc. were among the ones who made renewed attempts to revive and rediscover the ancient past in the late eighteenth century. It was during this time that the earlier pillar inscriptions and rock edicts of Aśoka were discovered and analysed. Along with this Buddhism was rediscovered in a fresh light through the newly found literary sources. The lithic inscriptional evidences combined with the literary sources (dominantly Buddhist) gives a huge corpus of material to study and critically analyse Aśoka. A careful examination of these material leads to the awareness that two aspects of same person being examined; the great ruler Aśoka who adopted the administrative policy of Dhamma and the person Aśoka who converted to Buddhism and was its faithful devotee. These two aspects are further scrutinised in detail in the following essay on the basis of varying sources.

Aśoka's policy of Dhamma

The most celebrated set of sources for the study of Aśoka are his Minor and Major rock edicts found all across the subcontinent along with several pillar edicts. These are considered to be a unique source in the terms that they are contemporary to the ruler being studied and provide first-hand information which, in high probability, was conveyed by the ruler himself. Scholars are of the view that these inscriptions were written as administrative orders and helped Aśoka to establish a smooth ruling administrative bureaucracy across his empire which covered almost all of Indian subcontinent. They inform us about the expectations of the ruler from his subjects and his view as to being the monarch of such a large empire while ensuring its smooth survival as well as prosperity. The ambitious militaristic campaigns to expand the empire, which started with his grandfather Chandragupta Maurya (founder of the dynasty), continued under Bimbisara and finally culminated into Aśoka's conquest of Kalinga (present day Orissa). The MRE (Major Rock Edict) XIII mentions the remorse and regret Aśoka felt, despite the victory, after the battle of Kalinga, owing to him witnessing the massive destruction and loss of life & property. This led to his decision of replacing the *bherighosha* or 'reverberation of war drum' with the *dhammaghosha* or 'drum of dhamma'. That is, the ruthless, war and expansion hungry ruler now supported and promoted the cause of peace and dhamma.

This dhamma of Aśoka, as explained in large no. of inscriptions wasn't a religious code but a way of life, as claimed by many prominent scholars including Romila Thapar. However, initially a large number of scholars were of the view that this promotion of *dhamma* by Aśoka was in fact the fulfilment of the emperor's personal desire to expand Buddhism, as it was his favoured personal religion. These scholars based their arguments on the features of dhamma as promoted in the inscriptions, like the emphasis on non-violence, ban on killing of certain animals, etc. However, one also notices the absence of any mention of the prime doctrines of Buddhism, which are, the concept of four noble truths, or the eight-fold path. Besides, the following of dhamma would ensure one's place in *swarg* (heaven), thus again, there's no occurrence of the notion of *nirvana* (moksha), as should have been the case according to the Buddhist beliefs. Therefore, one cannot trace the teachings of Buddhism in the features of Aśoka's *dhamma* as one would expect. Instead, the teachings of *dhamma* leans towards an ethical and moral code of conduct, involving practices which are recommended by all religions and belief systems. Respecting and obeying your elders, tolerance towards all types of religious belief systems, showing mercy & kindness, following the king's orders and looking after the fellow creatures including animals are all the moral practices which represent the general conduct of a model human being.

Besides, though Aśoka claims to have replaced *bherighosha* with *dhammaghosha* as the new tool for expansion, it was a general term and had no link with any specific religious or philosophical school. This is also evident from the missions he sent abroad to spread the concept of *dhamma* to places like Sri Lanka and even Greek ruled territories along the North West border. It is worth mentioning here that, the Greek version of the inscription uses the term *eusebeia* for *dhamma*, the literal meaning of which includes sacred duty and can include piety or pious conduct. (Thapar 1994, 25) And despite the propagation of peaceful passive *dhamma*, he still warns and dictates that any kind of opposition & disobeying will be met with strict results

and warns the forest tribes as well as other peripheral kingdoms of the same. Also, though animal violence was banned, exceptions were made for the royal kitchen to certain extent, though with limitations. One should also note here that several inscriptions mention the generous donations made to other religious sects as well like Ājīvikas, Jainism, etc. Aśoka was also careful to mention that all religious preachers should be respected and looked after i.e. Brhamans and Shamans. He also instructed to ensure various measures for the prosperity of his subjects which, according to the modern terms, could be equated to 'welfare state'. Reference is found mentioning the shady roads, easily accessible wells, rest houses, etc. built to ensure peaceful journey of travellers and their relaxation, along all the major roads and travel routes. He also instructed his spies and officials to keep him informed of all the significant events and encouraged his subjects to approach him at any time or place, be it even in the inner palace or while the king his sleeping. The name *Piyadasi* very well indicates the attitude of king towards his subjects, for him, they were his children and he as a father had a sacred duty to protect them.

Another pertinent point to be made here, is in regards with the title *Devnampiya*, meaning 'Beloved of Gods', used by the king. One should also recall here that king being a divine representative was not an unknown idea in the Ancient Indian kingship and thus was fully embraced by Aśoka as well. Also, the following of *dhamma* earns one merit and thus, takes him a step closer to *swarg*, thus God.

Buddhism as Aśoka's Personal Faith

All the above stated analysis of Aśoka was along the lines of his personality as a king. The above-mentioned attributes and characteristics are also stated in Buddhist texts while addressing Aśoka as the ideal Buddhist ruler and a role model for monarchs. Therefore, we now turn to the Aśoka's private relation with Buddhism. There isn't an iota of doubt that Aśoka embraced Buddhism as his personal religion. While inscriptional evidence (owing to MRE XIII) lead to the claims that his conversion was in the aftermath of Kalinga war. On the other hand, none of the written sources mention the Kalinga war. The northern Sanskrit and Chinese literature give credit to Sanyassi Upagupta, while according to the *theraveda* Sri Lankan Pali texts, his conversion wasn't a dramatic event but a progressive process of transition - first he became an *upasaka* (lay follower) and was then gradually impressed to the extent of devoting himself whole heartedly to the Sangha. Another discrepancy in the literary sources is the debate around corroboration of datable material and the historical authenticity of the same. The Sanskrit texts barely mention Aśoka, although Chandragupta and Bimbsara are recorded as Mauryan rulers in the Puranic texts. The Chinese travellers though mention Aśoka; it is only in line with the Buddhist perspective and at some places, including stray select references to inscriptions wherever it was found suitable. Mahayana texts, in attempt to glorify Buddhism, overemphasise the role of Upagupta and weave legendary stories depicting him as evil, bigot and demented person before conversion, in stark contrast, to the peace loving, calm and a 'perfect' king after the conversion. The most appropriate historical accuracy can be pleaded in favour of Sri Lankan Pali sources, which also corroborate with the inscriptional evidence to a great degree. The reason maybe that the writers of these texts revered Aśoka, as they credited him for the spread of Buddhism in their area, and considered him as a respected person who introduced them to this philosophy rather than a promoter and 'perfect' heir of Buddhist values and belief system. They refer to the more realistic war of succession (instead of brutal killings of brothers and ministers as in other texts) during the intervening four years, i.e., after his succession and before his coronation. The Sri Lankan Pali records, thus, according to Beni Madhab Barua, "cannot but appear to be comparatively more realistic and reliable, chronologically sounder and nearer the truth," (Guruge 1994, 47)

Inscriptional and literary evidences (especially Sri Lankan Pali texts) merged together gives one a pretty clear picture of Aśoka's personal Buddhist inclinations. In the MRE 1 (Ahraura version) he declares to have went on a pilgrimage for 256 nights... (Guruge 1994, 43-44) He brags about how previous rulers went on Vihar-yatra (pleasure tours), while he as a dedicated Buddhist and a just ruler goes on dhamma-yatras (on pilgrimage and to spread the word of dhamma). He is strongly associated with sangha as depicted in the MPE 1 (Sanchi text) where he warns anyone of dire consequences, that of being expelled, to any monk or nun who attempts to divide the Sangha... (Guruge 1994, 44-45) These instances distinctly depict the Buddhist inclinations of the ruler. Besides the joining of Sangha by his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta and furthermore, the precedent of their going to Sri Lanka to spread dhamma as well as Buddhism are another example of the Aśoka's dedication to Buddhism. Also, while the inscriptions are silent on this, corroboration of certain dates and claims, like purification of sangha and his association with high monks, with the literary sources provide us reliable evidence to establish the historicity of the third Buddhist council. Although, the exact dates are still under deliberation. (Guruge 1994, 76-77)

However, here again one should be cautious of the fact that Aśoka never allowed his personal biasness towards Buddhism to affect his administrative machinery. The Dhamma mahamattas appointed all over the subcontinent were to look after the 'code of conduct' dhamma and not to spread Buddhism. The missions sent by Aśoka through state resources were again to spread Dhamma. In few instances, where Buddhist missions were sent, they were organised with the help of high monks of sangha and personal patronage of Aśoka. His policy of toleration is also evident from the various donations made to other sects, one prominent example being patronage to Ājīvikas in form of Barabar caves (even Ājīvikas and Buddhists were in constant ideological disagreement).

Conclusion

Thus, from the above analysis, it can be concluded that while Aśoka, personally was a staunch Buddhist believer, he never allowed this fact to negatively affect or hinder his role as an efficient ruler and administrator. Some scholars argue that though not outrightly, Aśoka's dhamma had the distant echoes and impressions of the Buddhist values and morals. Countering this claim, one has to make a note here of the historical context. Mauryan rule was a time period when the society as a whole was undergoing change and there was development as well as spread of new ideas, philosophies and belief systems. Even Aśoka's predecessors were personally not the supporters of Vedic Brahmanism, while Chandragupta converted to Jainism; Bimbisara on the other hand was a strong supporter of the Ājīvika sect. Repeated mention and emphasis on the tolerance for all religions as an important virtue, points to the fact that there might actually have been a continuous struggle for ideological dominance between various sects. It was in keeping in line with these new developments that Aśoka condemned some of the useless rituals while at the same time insisted on the trait of respect for all Brahmins and shamans, placing them all on an equal platform. And so, while Dhamma might have had slight impressions of Buddhism, these were not to promote Buddhism alone as a religion but were in fact the reflections of the on-going changes in the belief systems in the concurrent socio-cultural scenario and an attempt by a ruler to navigate through these tumultuous times with a (largely effective and successful) tool to maintain peace and order while ruling a diverse set of people as his subjects. In terms of sources, while first hand orders of king are a delight for a history scholar, it is important not to negate other, later, literary sources and instead use them in corroboration with each other to attain better and more authentic result of creating the most accurate account of the past.

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