

“Emperor Asoka’s Place in History: A Review of Prevalent Opinions”



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Abstract: The most important Buddhist layman in history has been the Emperor Asoka, who ruled most of India for the middle third of the third century B.C. On the capital of one of the pillars Asoka erected is beautifully carved a wheel with many spokes. This representation of the wheel of Dhamma which the Buddha set in motion is the symbol chosen to adorn the flag of the modern state of India. The lions on the same capital are on the state seal. Thus India recalls its “righteous ruler.” Asoka is a towering figure for many other reasons too, but we confine ourselves to his role in Buddhist history. Before Asoka Buddhism had spread through the northern half of India; but it was his patronage which made it a world religion. This paper focused about the history of great emporor Ashoka.

Keywords: Contrary, Students, History, Indian, Purpose, Historical, Ashoka, etc.

INTRODUCTION :

The process, which started with the earliest oral traditions of the Theravāda School of Buddhism in India and subsequently carried on in the historical records of the Buddhist Sangha of Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Cambodia, has continued to modern times. Although, as will be shown later in this paper, Asoka 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 the 1830s. Commencing with the discovery and deciphering of his most impressive lithic records on rocks and pillars and his identification with Asoka the Righteous (Dhammāsoka) of Sri Lankan Pali literature, Asoka has become the cynosure of not only scholarly attention but also popular admiration. Since the publication of the first monograph on Asoka by Vincent A. Smith in 1901, hardly a decade has elapsed without a fresh attempt to evaluate his place in history from a different point of view [1]. Opinions on his career and achievements are indeed numerous.

ASOKA — THE GREAT UPASAKA:

Asoka was the grandson and second successor of Candragupta, who founded the Mauryan dynasty and empire about 324 B.C. We have very little evidence about the precise extent of what Candragupta conquered and even less about the activities of his son Bindusāra, but Candragupta's empire may already have covered northern India from coast to coast and probably comprised about two-thirds of the sub-continent. Bindusāra and Asoka extended it further to the south. The capital was the city of Pāṭaliputta, which had been founded as the new capital of Magadha fairly soon after the Buddha's death; modern Patna is on the same site. We shall commence our analysis by reviewing what each tradition has highlighted as its concept or image of Asoka as a historical personage. [2]

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

It is regrettable but true that the mainstream Indian tradition and literature is well-nigh devoid of historical sense, and consequently conscious works of history are virtually non-existent. The nearest to a historical record are the Purāṇas, even though these works are avowedly religious in character and legendary in content. But on account of an artificially contrived stratagem to feign antiquity, they present their scanty but nevertheless invaluable genealogical lists as prophecies in the future tense rather than facts of past history. As Pargiter concluded, even in these lists, “the lack of the historical sense was a fertile source of confusion [3].” The Purāṇas record hardly anything on Asoka other than the “prophecy” that he would succeed Vindusāra (Bindusāra of Buddhist sources) and thus be the third monarch of the Mauryan Dynasty with a reign of 36 years. His Mauryan origin and descent from Candragupta, too, are recorded. In contrast to the founder of the Mauryan Dynasty, Candragupta, on whom the mainstream Indian tradition and literature lavished much attention, Asoka had been relegated to oblivion. Either they deliberately ignored him on account of his partiality to Buddhism or his life of non-violent religious and social activity presented no events which captured their imagination and commanded romantic treatment in ballad, legend or drama. As stated by Romila Thapar in *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, the most comprehensive of the Asokan monographs hitherto published: “In the Indian secular sources, Asoka remained largely a name in the dynastic king lists, as obscure during the later centuries as the script in which he had his edicts engraved [4]. The fact that the work of Asoka as a monarch was almost erased from Indian history and thought cannot be overlooked. The political value of Asoka’s ideals was successfully buried in the oblivion of the past.... No later king of any standing tried consciously to adopt these principles as the basis of his policy.”

The existence of this twelfth century account of an Asoka (who could have even been only a Kashmirian ruler of some renown) seems to minimize the indignity that the life and achievements of the best documented monarch in Indian history have to be reconstructed from non-Hindu sources. Hitherto, apart from Rudradaman’s inscription (150 A.C.), the mainstream Indian

tradition and literature have only drawn a virtual blank as regards Asoka, the Mauryan Emperor, whom the intelligentsia of the modern world — not merely the scholars — hold in great esteem. This fact has had a significant influence on the evaluation of Emperor Asoka's place in history as far as most of the scholars of Indian origin are concerned. We shall return to this question after we examine the information gleanable from Buddhist sources as to how they assessed Asoka's place in history [5].

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 Asoka figures quite prominently. The earliest among them could have come into being between 150 and 50 B.C. As the Sanskrit original is no longer extant, its actual title is not known but it has been called a "Book on King Asoka." We know it from two Chinese translations: A-yü-wang chuang (i.e. Aśokāvadāna) by the Parthian Fa-k'in (281 – 306 A.C.) and A-yüwang-ching (i.e. Asokarājasūtra) by Sanghabhadra or Sanghabhata in an abridged version in 512 A.C. This was the main source for the cycle of Asoka legends in the Divyāvadāna, consisting of Pāmsupradānāvadāna, Kunālāvadāna, Vitaśokāvadāna and Aśokāvadāna. The Divyāvadāna, in Buddhist Sanskrit prose interspersed with verse, contains older parts datable as early as the first century A.C. and later parts which could be as late as the fourth century [6].

ASOKA OF THE SRI LANKAN PALI SOURCES:

The most fertile source of historical information on Asoka has been the Pali literature of Sri Lanka, which recorded the Theravāda tradition on the introduction of Buddhism to the island and its development there. Events in India figure in this tradition as far as they led to the establishment of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Thus, apart from the life of the Buddha, the three Councils at which were rehearsed and formulated the Buddhist Canon and the schisms and schools occupied their main attention. In this tradition, Asoka commanded paramount importance as patron of the Third Council, the promoter of the missionary movement to propagate Buddhism widely, and finally the

father of the two great missionaries Mahinda and Saghamittā, to whom Sri Lanka owes its Buddhist Order. As opposed to the attitude of the Northern Buddhists to Asoka, as elaborated in the previous section, the Theravādins considered him to be a part — indeed a very important part of their ecclesiastical history. There was no need to glorify him with edifying tales of his deeds because he was not proffered as an example for emulation. So Theravadins had no avadānas (Pali: apādana) on him.³⁸ As Upagupta did not figure as a personage (certainly not a patriarch) in the Theravāda tradition, Asoka was not associated with Upagupta's career and achievements either. Thus whatever the Theravāda tradition has recorded of Asoka is history as the early monks knew and remembered it. Their objective being more historical in this case than religious, what they recorded was quite substantial and, as archaeological and epigraphical evidence have established, impressively reliable, in spite of inevitable religious elements like accounts of past births [7].

ASOKA OF EDICTS AND INSCRIPTIONS:

While for over 2,000 years, Asoka was virtually forgotten, piously glorified, or gratefully remembered in each of the traditions which are dealt with above, the lithic records in his own words awaited discovery and study. 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 *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum* by Alexander Cunningham in 1879. With the publication of revised texts and translations by Hultzsch in 1925, students of history had an adequate tool for research although a comprehensive analysis was not attempted until Beni Madhab Barua published his *Asoka and His Inscriptions* in 1945. More inscriptions have been since discovered and deciphered, among the latest being the four edicts found in 1969 in the Province of Laghman in Afghanistan [8]. The thirty-four lithic records of Asoka the major edicts and inscriptions in multiple copies located thousands of kilometres apart provide substantial information on the virtues which he upheld and wished to propagate among his subjects, his tolerant attitude to different religious sects, and the administrative machinery which he had utilized to spread his message of Dharma. His availability

at all times to attend to his kingly duties was particularly emphasized. He voiced his concern over the welfare of the people (i.e. “All people are my children”) and resorted to exhortation and restriction as a dual policy for the promotion of Dharma. He recounted the example he had himself set in minimizing the slaughter of animals and published what might be the earliest known list of protected species. He instructed his officials to be just and impartial and advised against harassment and excessive punitive measures [9]. He listed the good deeds he had done both within and outside his empire and drew special attention to how he extended his policy of Dharmavijaya (i.e. conquest through righteousness) beyond his borders in all directions, especially to five Hellenic kingdoms of the West. Striking a personal note, Asoka recounted his gradual identification with Buddhism, gave expression to his knowledge and appreciation of a number of Buddhist texts, and announced his determination to wipe out schisms within the Sangha. His pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places were both mentioned and specifically commemorated with inscribed pillars in several places. His policy of religious tolerance was marked by references to donations to the Ājīvikas [10].

CONCLUSION:

On the criterion of being corroborated by independent literary, archaeological or epigraphical evidence, the Sri Lankan Pali records and the Theravāda tradition founded on them can be relied upon as providing a credible account of the role and achievements of Asoka as far as his services to the Buddhist cause are concerned. The Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan sources of the Northern Buddhist tradition do reflect the memory of Asoka’s munificence, pilgrimages and religious buildings. But their historical reliability has been considerably reduced, firstly, because Asoka figured in Avadānas where his spiritual adviser Upagupta was more prominent, and, secondly, because the chronology had been confused due to Upagupta’s contemporaneity with Kālāśoka. Compared to these, the least helpful are the Purānas, while Kalhana’s Rājataranginī can hardly be a historical source for Asoka the Mauryan Emperor.

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