

Emperor Asoka and Buddhism: Unresolved Discrepancies between Buddhist Tradition & Asokan Inscriptions

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Abstract – *A large number of international scholars agree that Emperor ASOKA of India in the third century B.C. was one of the greatest conquerors who later achieved the most difficult conquest of all the conquest of himself through self-conviction and his perception of human suffering. After embracing the Dhamma of the Buddha as his guide and refuge, he transformed the goal of his regime from military conquest to conquest by Dhamma. By providing royal patronage for the propagation of Buddhism both within and outside his vast dominion, he helped promote the metamorphosis of Buddhism from one among many sects of Indian ascetic spirituality into a world religion that was eventually to penetrate almost all of southern and eastern Asia. The present collection of papers by leading Indological scholars is intended to highlight different aspects of the close connection between the political and religious life of this exemplary Indian ruler.*

Keywords: India, Asoka, Buddhism, Century, Religious.

INTRODUCTION

“Amidst tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of ASOKA shines, and shines alone, a star.” This statement reflects a widely held appraisal of this unique personality in Indian history by the informed intelligentsia of the world. The appraisal is based in general on the numerous edicts and inscriptions through which he sought to teach his subjects a sublime moral way of life. Among these edicts, the one which has won for him the highest admiration is Rock Edict (RE), which van Buitenan describes as “the most moving document of any dynamic history [1].”

Writing not earlier than five years after the event, Emperor ASOKA portrays in this Edict the dramatic change of heart he experienced on account of the havoc of death and deportation, famine and pestilence that was caused by his war of conquest against Kalinga. The text, as found at Erragudi, Girnar, Kalsi, Maneshra, Shahbazgarhi and Kandahar, runs as follows: The country of the Kalingas was conquered by King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods, eight years after his coronation. In this war in Kalinga, men and animals numbering one hundred and fifty thousand were carried away captive from that country; as many as one hundred thousand were killed there in action and many times that number perished. After that, now that

the country of the Kalingas has been conquered, the Beloved of the Gods is devoted to an intense practice of the duties relating to Dharma, to a longing for Dharma and to the inculcation of Dharma among the people [2]. This is due to the repentance of the Beloved of the Gods on having conquered the country of the Kalingas.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The rulers of kingdoms and republics of northeast India extended their patronage to “heteropax sects” (i.e. unorthodox sects when viewed from the Vedic or Brahmanical standpoint) as “one way of avoiding the meddling of Brahmins (high-caste Hindus) in the affairs of the state.” While more evidence will be needed before one accepts this view in toto, the fact remains that ASOKA’s ancestors were associated with Jains and Ājīvakas according to both tradition and literary sources. The founder of the Mauryan dynasty, Candragupta, was in all probability propelled to and sustained in power by the Brahman political theoretician Kaunilya, reputedly the author of the Arthaśāstra. But the Jain tradition asserts that he abdicated the throne, adopted the life of a Jain ascetic and fasted to death at Srāvana Belgola near Mysore [3]. As regards the religious affiliations of his son, Bindusāra, the Sri Lankan Buddhist records portray him as a devotee of Brahmanism providing alms to 60,000 Brahmins daily at Pāṇaliputra. According to Greek sources, he had appealed to the Seleucid king of Syria,

Antiochus I, for a Greek philosopher to instruct him. Bindusāra's wife, Dharma the mother of ASOKA is mentioned in Buddhist sources as a devotee of Ājīvakas and her family preceptor is named in Pali sources as Janāsana (Jarāsana, Jarasona) and in Sanskrit as Pingalavatsa. ASOKA, too, dedicated at least two caves to the Ājīvakas in the twelfth year from his coronation. What becomes very clear from these records is that at this particular time in India, and possibly even in Sri Lanka where Pandukabhaya had built them a residence, the Ājīvakas constituted a strong and vibrant religious movement. It is stated in Buddhist sources that when ASOKA was disenchanted with the Brahmins (whom he supported in continuation of his father's practice) and sought for new religious guidance, the saints and teachers whom the Emperor's men could summon were Ājīvakas, Jains and Parivrājakas. Neither tradition nor literary sources associate Buddhism with either Candragupta or Bindusāra, even though an effort had been made to trace the genealogy of the Mauryas to the kinsmen of the Buddha, the Sakyas. Thus the first Maurya emperor to come under the influence of Buddhism or to support Buddhist institutions was ASOKA [4].

1. ASOKA's Role in the Propagation of Buddhism in his Empire:

The same type of discrepancy which exists between ASOKA's own inscriptions and the Buddhist tradition relating to his conversion to Buddhism persists as regards his role in the propagation of Buddhism. According to Buddhist literary sources, ASOKA had been the ideal Buddhist ruler extending his generous and devout patronage to Buddhism in every possible way. Specifically mentioned is his initiative in both internal and foreign missionary endeavours after the Third Buddhist Council. As already stated earlier, the accuracy of especially the Sri Lankan Pali sources as regards information on these missions has been established beyond doubt on account of archaeological corroboration. But the nagging question which every ASOKA scholar had to deal with has been why the inscriptions of ASOKA are themselves less specific [5].

2. Foreign Missions of ASOKA:

He did acquire an in-depth grasp of the doctrines, including its Canonical sources, as a result of his close association with the Sangha. There is no evidence that he ever became a Buddhist monk himself. On his own admission, his interest in Buddhism had grown gradually over a period of two years and it was only in the third that it became really enthusiastic. There is no discrepancy between the Buddhist tradition which names Nyagrodha or Samudra as the monk responsible for his conversion and ASOKA's inscriptions which simply refer to the Sangha rather than to any individual monk. As regards

Moggaliputta Tissa, the central figure in the Buddhist activities of ASOKA, the inscription "Sappurisasā Mogalliputasa" on a relic casket from Tope No. 2 of the Sānchi group establishes his historicity as well as his importance in the Saṅgha. As regards Upagupta to whom a comparative role is assigned in Sanskrit sources, no corresponding archaeological evidence has yet been found.

ASOKA was already a Buddhist by conversion before his military operations to conquer Kalinga. If the futility of war was convincingly brought to ASOKA's attention by this war, the most likely reason was that the war itself was inconclusive. He had conquered only the coastal strip of Kalinga leaving the bulk of the territory outside his dominions with angry people who had to be placated and pacified. The image of an emperor eschewing war after victory because of remorse and repentance which most of the popular writers on ASOKA liked to portray with enthusiasm is, unfortunately, not borne out by the evidence. The Buddhist records make no mention of a Kalinga war because ASOKA's conversion was anterior to it and its impact on his faith in Buddhism, if any, was incidental. But for ASOKA, the conviction that all the havoc he created was futile had been a turning point in his imperialistic policy. He abandoned the traditional duty of an Indian monarch to engage in digvijaya (military conquest), and substituted in its place his own form of Dharmavijaya, which he justified by affirming that the conqueror and the conquered were both happy when the conquest was through Dharma.

He, found only on the Topra Pillar now in Delhi and dated in the 27th year from coronation, summarizes ASOKA's efforts for the promotion of the Dharma. In his own words, the following were the steps he had taken: This thought occurred to me: "I will cause proclamations of Dharma to be proclaimed and instruction in Dharma to be imparted. Hearing these, the people will conform to them, will be elevated and will progress considerably through the promotion of Dharma [6]." For this purpose have I caused proclamations on Dharma to be proclaimed and various kinds of instruction in Dharma have I ordered to be imparted, so that those officers of mine who are placed by me over many people will also preach and disseminate them. And the Rajjukas are placed by me over many hundred thousands of beings and they have also been ordered: "Instruct the people who are devoted to Dharma in such and such a manner." Having this very matter in view, I have set up pillars bearing records relating to Dharma, appointed Mahāmātras to deal with the affairs connected with Dharma, and issued proclamations on Dharma [7]. Those Dharma-Mahāmātras of mine are occupied with various kinds of activities which are beneficial both to ascetics and to householders. And they are occupied with all the religious sects. I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the affairs of the

Sangha. Likewise I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the Brāhmanas and Ājīvakas. Similarly I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the Nirgranthas [8]. In the same way I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with various other religious sects. The different Mahāmātras are occupied not only with the communities referred to above, but also with the other sects not mentioned specifically. My intention is that the noble deeds of Dharma and the practice of Dharma which consists of compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness will thus be promoted among men [9]. Whatever good deeds I have performed, those the people have imitated and to those they are conforming. Thereby they have progressed and will progress further in respect of obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders, courtesy to the aged and courtesy to the Brāhmanas and Śramanas, to the poor and the distressed, and even to slaves and servants. This progress of Dharma among men has been promoted by me only in two ways, viz., by imposing restrictions in accordance with the principles of Dharma and by exhortation. But of these two, the restrictions relating to Dharma are of little consequence. By exhortation, however, Dharma has been promoted considerably. The restrictions relating to Dharma are, indeed, such as have been enjoined by me, viz., that certain animals are exempt from slaughter, and also the numerous other restrictions relating to Dharma that I have imposed. The progress of Dharma among men has indeed been promoted by me considerably by exhortation in regard to the abstention from hurting any living being and abstention from killing any animal. Conspicuous by its absence is any reference in this particular inscription to foreign missions [10]. If ASOKA assigned high priority to dissemination of Dharma beyond his dominions, why was this fact left out from what appears to be a comprehensive record of his achievements? But three edicts record ASOKA's relations with territories outside his empire.

CONCLUSION:

In this analysis, we have not only found some answers related to great work of emperor Ashok but also uncovered new issues. This is to be expected when we deal with a topic regarding which the diversity of the sources of information is as complex as the socio-cultural background, scholarly training, and underlying motives, biases and prejudices of the interpreters of such information. It was undoubtedly Buddhism which ASOKA embraced as his personal religion.

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2. This extract is from a fragmentary inscription in Greek presenting a condensed adaptation of RE XII and RE XIII. It was found at Kandahar in 1963.
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4. For a comprehensive account which draws from the Sri Lankan Pali sources, see G.P. Malalasekera, Dictionary of Pali Proper Names (London: Indian Texts Series, 1938), s.v. Asoka.
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8. Kalyāni (Kelaniya University Journal), II, (1983),
9. Such an analysis is attempted in my later article: "Emperor ASOKA's Place in History: A Review of Prevalent Opinions."
10. For a discussion of the main characteristics of popular Buddhism, see Ananda W.P. Guruge, Buddhism: The Religion and its Culture, 2nd. ed. rev. (Colombo, 1984), Chapter VIII.