

A Study on Transformational Leadership of Great Ashoka and Contribution towards Love and Peace in Context of Buddhism

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Abstract – 3rd century BCE India saw in Aśoka a legendary emperor, widely admired for his political achievements but even more so for his unprecedented humanitarian approach to governance, which was deeply shaped by the Buddhist faith he adopted. His outstanding historical example invites a closer investigation into his character and behaviour patterns in the search for a new role model of cross-cultural leadership excellence. In this work I will contrast the leadership approaches of today which are strongly influenced by the Western academic world with the holistic, human-centred way we can extract from Buddhist teachings. From there I will examine Aśoka's biography and character, as far as we can reinterpret from the available historical material, to extract in what manner and how closely he embodied the Buddhist ideal of leadership. To do so, I will as far as possible make use of archeologic evidence available in the form of epigraphs issued by the emperor. In this way, I hope to inspire leaders, Buddhists or non-Buddhists, to consider and embrace a leadership style which is felt most suitable for a globalised world we live in.

Key Words: Ashoka, Buddhism, Transformational Leader.

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INTRODUCTION

We live in a time of globalisation. Friedman realised in his bestseller *The World is Flat* that "it is now possible for more people than ever to collaborate and compete in real time with more other people on more different kinds of work from more different corners of the planet and on a more equal footing than at any previous time in the history of the world."¹ While this might sound exciting at first, it poses new demands on today's leaders who must possess the ability to integrate various cultural, religious and historical traditions with their very different intrinsic and extrinsic needs. There is no universal set of cultural values despite the unifying fact that every living being seeks happiness. True leadership excellence acknowledges this and as a result, it focuses on stakeholder value (common good). While the academic field of leadership studies, in which interest has been particularly gaining momentum in the last few decades, still tend to favour common Western values like competition, growth, individual achievements and fulfilment of one's own needs, traditional Asian values such as humility, gratitude and service to one's family and community might provide an antipole.³ The search for Asian role models, however, has not made known many names in the West. The *Art of War* attributed to Sun Tzu (544-496 BCE) might provide one example which has recently gained some popularity

in leadership circles.⁴ It is rather peculiar yet significant for the state of affairs in today's business environment that leaders seek guidance in the strategy work of a warlord. It is this unease that motivates me to look out what Buddhism has to say and whether it can find a better role model in King Aśoka. Aśoka the Great (304-232 BCE)⁵ was an ancient king of the Mauryan Empire which had unified the Indian subcontinent for the first time in its history and under whom it developed to its greatest extent. His legacy almost went extinct in India's later Islamic history until European orientalist began to rediscover it in the late eighteenth century, and, along with it, much we know about Buddhism today. Ever since Indian's lost child received the highest recognition and adulation by his descendants and internationally. The Republic of India has chosen the Aśoka-Chakra (wheel) as its symbol in the national flag as well as the Four-Lion-Capital (Ashok stambh) as the emblem of the republic, and Bollywood portrayed him in a US\$1.9m movie production in 2001 which was shown at Venice Film Festival. H. G. Wells once wrote, "[a]midst the 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, almost alone, a star."⁶

To approach the leadership ideals of that time we have to think in the field of good governance. The Canonical texts provide us with several accounts where the Buddha met important political leaders who sought his advice, such as king Bimbisara of Magadha or king Pasenadi of Kosala. From such sermons as well as from the way the Buddha himself lead his community of disciples, we can construct a Buddhist perspective on leadership.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Miriam Grace traces the root lead, first recorded around 825 CE, back to the Anglo-Saxon Old English word *lædan* (causal form of *lithan* - 'to travel', Proto-Indo-European: **leit-2*)⁹ which changed its genuine meaning around four centuries later into 'to guide' and only in the 19th century adopted the concepts of 'influence' and 'exercising of domination'. "By this time," Mrs Grace notes "the term leadership was gaining usage in politics and was used as a way to describe what leaders do." Another source adds that the meaning of 'to be in first place' evolved somewhere in the late 14th century.

To arrive at a meaningful definition of leadership is more challenging. If Rosen (1984) is correct that "leadership is a role that is understood in terms of the social and cultural context within which it is embedded"¹² we cannot come up with a definition per se but need to define it in the socio cultural context it takes place. To turn the argument around, a definition will only be meaningful within the particular leadership style it tries to define, and as we shall see, there are plenty. Therefore, Rost (1993) dedicated two entire chapters of his book *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* on the changing leadership definitions over the past 200 years and Stogdill concluded: "that there are most as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept." We may avoid this trap by suggesting an adoption of an often cited inspirational quote, attributed to John Quincy Adams: "If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more and become more, [without compromising the happiness of yourself and others,] you are a leader."

Assuming that leadership traits are intrinsic, Thomas Carlyle proposed the 'Great-Man' Theory in 1840, which Herbert Spencer strongly objected about two decades later.¹⁶ In the attempt to also consider external forces, Georg W. Allport (1897–1967) identified nearly 4500 mental, physical and social characteristics, categorised in three hierarchy levels. On his concept, the Trait Theory tried to isolate but failed to identify a definite set of defining attributes in existing leaders (e.g. Stogdill, 1974).

Leaders do instead of their personal characteristics (e.g. McGregor, 1960; Blake and Mouton, 1964)¹⁸ and suggested that leader qualities are not hard-wired but that one can be trained to become a

leader. Then, Fiedler (1964) set the stage for the Contingency Theories proposing that there is not one but many leadership styles which should be selected according to the situation-at-hand.¹⁹ While Fiedler gravitated to the view to match the leader to the situation for best results, Hersey and Blanchard (1969) proposed that adoption by the leader is possible (Situational Theory) and John Adair (1973) argued that a leader must balance his actions between 'task', 'team' and 'individual' needs.²⁰ In 1978,

McGregor Burns added the moral and motivational dimension to leadership. His later called Transformational Leadership emphasised on the leaders' ability to motivate and empower followers as well as to convert them to moral agents.²¹ The concepts of Charismatic Leadership, first introduced by Weber (1947) and House (1976),²² combined aspects of the Transformational Theory with those of the earlier Trait and 'Great Man' Theories and received much popularity in the 1980's and 90's. Charismatic leaders were believed to provide a 'heroic' approach, vision and positive inspiration in times of economic recession but confidence in it has been heavily shaken by some high-profile corporate scandals. From focusing instead on the moral and ethical dimension, introduced by the Transformational Leadership, evolved the Servant Leadership (Greenleaf, 1970) putting the leader as a facilitator for the good of the team and organisation. Finally, Gronn (2002) dissociates, in what he calls Distributed Leadership, the leadership responsibility from organisational hierarchy proposing that individuals can exert leadership influence despite their levels and roles in the organisation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study the traits of Transformational Leadership.
2. To analyse the principles and morals of Buddhism.
3. To evaluate the contribution of Ashoka towards Love and Peace in Light of Buddhism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is carried out to make qualitative and comprehensive evaluation of transformational leadership of Ashoka. The type and nature of research is descriptive. For the purpose descriptive research design (observational method & case-study method) has been adopted which is based on the secondary data and the secondary sources of data were the various websites, published annual reports and literatures which are pertaining

to title of research. The key intention of the study is to evaluate the contribution of Ashoka towards Love and Peace in context of Buddhism.

RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Ashoka as a benchmark of Transformational Leader

Ashoka, the famous Mauryan emperor, ruled a major part of the Indian sub-continent in the third century before the Common Era. Certain new age truths find resonance in Ashoka's life defying the double score of centuries lying between him and us.

Self-reformation

The first truth emerging from Ashoka's tale is the ability to transform one's self from bad to good, and good to better, by self-introspection. Had Ashoka not introspected on his past doings, he would have never thought of reforming his nature. The introspection included meditating on his faults and mending his ways with drastic changes in his reaction to the same circumstances. Thus, while he earlier preached war, the reformed Ashoka believed in peaceful communication.

Effective communication

The second major learning from Ashoka's life is the use of latest communication tools to express one's thoughts, forcefully and effectively, an idea which would certainly appeal to a generation hooked to social media. Ashoka's Edicts were etched not only in Brahmi, the chief script of his empire, but also in Aramaic (an ancient Persian script), in Greek and in Kharosthi, the local script of North-West India. By translating his message of peace in these many scripts and languages, Ashoka managed to reach out to as many people as possible not only from his own empire but also the foreign emissaries of Greek and Persian Empires.

Foreign policy

One cannot dismiss Ashoka's smart use of foreign policy to ensure peace on borders as he named five contemporary Greek rulers with whom he maintained contact after his conquest of Kalinga. Ashoka seems to be the first Indian ruler to make such international treaties to ensure peace through negotiation. Ashoka's peaceful relations with neighbours were most certainly an inspiration for India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, also the country's first External Affairs Minister, in formulating peaceful ties based on negotiation with our neighbouring countries.

Conservation of wildlife

Ashoka's policy of protection of animals from unwanted sacrifices began the movement towards making vegetarianism an integral part of Indian life

as the major precepts of Buddhist (originally Jain) thought found their way into mainstream lifestyles. Seen from the viewpoint of animal rights, Ashoka's policy makes eminent sense both in its appeal for compassionate treatment of domesticated animals and conservation of wildlife in the world.

Equal law

Another striking feature of Ashoka's four-decade long rule was the setting up of one of the first welfare states in the ancient world with equal laws and punishments for all its subjects. The emperor took an almost paternal interest in the welfare of his populace, spending state funds on developing/improving water reservoirs (Junagadh's Girnar city had a dam built by Ashoka's grandfather, Chandragupta Maurya, which was expanded with additions of canals through Ashoka's 'Yavana' Greek governor), highways lined with shade trees, frequent wells, orchards and public guest houses for travellers.

A tolerant leader

Last but not least, Ashoka stands out as a beacon of tolerance to other 'faiths' or divergent views in a period where heterodox faiths like Buddhism, Jainism and an extinct faith, Ajivikas, rose to claim new followers. His sage advice of tolerance comes out in an edict where he proclaims, "All sects deserve reverence for one reason or another. By thus acting, a man not only exalts his own sect but also does service to the sects of other people and humanity in general." In an echo of the current debate on Free Speech and tolerance, he further states, "The Beloved of Gods (Devanampiya) considers the control of one's speech, so as to not extol one's sect or disparage another on unsuitable (social) occasions, to be the basis of concord in the society. Concord is to be commended so that men may hear one another's principles." It is thus with good reason that the Indian Republic chose Ashoka's Lion Capital at Sarnath as its state emblem to reflect the same harmony achieved by this great ruler in the remotest period of Indian History and effect a continuity with his humane policies towards the people of the modern Indian nation.

Buddhism and Ashoka

Ashoka made Buddhism the state religion around 260 B.C. He was perhaps the first emperor in history of India who tried to establish a Buddhist polity by implementing the Dasa Raja Dharma or the ten precepts outlined by Lord Buddha himself as the duty of a perfect ruler. They are enumerated as:

1. To be liberal and avoid selfishness

2. To maintain a high moral character
3. To be prepared to sacrifice one's own pleasure for the well-being of the subjects
4. To be honest and maintain absolute integrity
5. To be kind and gentle
6. To lead a simple life for the subjects to emulate
7. To be free from hatred of any kind
8. To exercise non-violence
9. To practice patience
10. To respect public opinion to promote peace and harmony
9. Reverence for the dharma and a proper attitude towards teachers was considered better than marriage or other worldly celebrations, by the Emperor.
10. Emperor surmised that glory and fame count for nothing if people do not respect the dharma.
11. He considered giving the dharma to others is the best gift anyone can have.
12. Whoever praises his own religion, due to excessive devotion, and condemns others with the thought "Let me glorify my own religion," only harms his own religion. Therefore contact (between religions) is good.
13. Ashoka preached that conquest by the dharma is superior to conquest by force but if conquest by force is carried out, it should be 'forbearance and light punishment'.

Based on these 10 principles preached by Lord Buddha, Ashoka dictated the practice of Dharma that became the backbone of his philanthropic and tolerant administration. Dharma was neither a new religion nor a new political philosophy. It was a way of life, outlined in a code of conduct and a set of principles that he encouraged his subjects to adopt to lead a peaceful and prosperous life. He undertook the propagation of these philosophies through publication of 14 edicts that he spread out throughout his empire.

Ashoka's Edicts:

1. No living being were to be slaughtered or sacrificed.
2. Medical care for human as well as animals throughout his Empire
3. Monks to tour the empire every five years teaching the principles of dharma to the common people.
4. One should always respect one's parents, priests and monks
5. Prisoners to be treated humanely
6. He encouraged his subjects to report to him their concerns regarding the welfare of the administration at all times no matter where he is or what he is doing.
7. He welcomed all religions as they desire self-control and purity of heart.
8. He encouraged his subjects to give to monks, Brahmans and to the needy.

CONCLUSION

Emperor Aśoka is a prominent example of Buddhist leadership style put into practice. Even though much of his biography is clouded in myths and history, his ministry has survived more than two millennia as having been exemplary in good governance concerned with social welfare without compromising business growth. His personal leadership style is well in harmony with Buddhist ideas. Whether he adopted those merely out of faith or out of rather strategic considerations is debatable even though his devotional motives surmount. Since at his time the ink of the canon was not dry, we cannot definitely say whether Aśoka's leadership is an exact implementation of Buddhist views readily available to him or whether his example might have shaped Buddhist scriptures so that they now appear matching today. In fact, reciprocity seems quite likely. However, that Aśoka's leadership style qualifies as Buddhist is secondary inasmuch as its significance lies in its achievements for the common good and that his role model can be adopted by Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike. Nevertheless, the Buddhist community owes him great respect for his achievements as without his zealous work to spread the Buddhist teaching, not much of it might have survived in the world today. It would be very beneficial for our today's society if Aśoka's example inspired more leaders to dream more, learn more, do more and become more for the well-being of a globalised community.

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