

ASHOKA THE GREAT (269-232 BC)

Ashoka was the son of Bindusara. He is considered among the greatest rulers of all times. He was the first ruler who tried to maintain direct contact with his subjects. He ruled for nearly 40 years. Most of the information about the life of Ashoka can be had from the 50 edicts he placed throughout India. The most important of these edicts is the Rock Edict XIII (257-256 BC). It offers account of the eight years of the Kalinga War. The destruction and the sorrow that he witnessed in the war transformed Ashoka from a warrior to a peace loving ruler. He started propagating Buddhism. The impact of Ashoka's moral conquest can be seen not only within India but also in the far off Empires like Syria, Egypt and Macedonia and Epirus. Significantly, Ashoka has been referred to with names of Devanumpriya or Priyadarshini throughout the edicts.

Ashoka's Pillar Edict I

Emperor Priyadarshini says, 'I commanded this edict on Dharma to be engraved 26 years after my coronation. It is difficult to achieve happiness, either in this world or in the next, except by intense love of Dharma, intense self-examination, intense obedience, intense fear of evil and intense enthusiasm. Yet, as a result of my instruction, regard for Dharma and the love of Dharma have increased day by day and will continue to increase. My official of all ranks high, low and intermediate act in accordance with the precepts of my instruction, and by their example and influence they are able to recall fickle minded people to their duty. The officials of the border districts enforce my injunctions in the same way. For these are their rules: to govern according to Dharma, to administer justice according to Dharma, to

advance the people's happiness according to Dharma and to protect them according to Dharma.

Ashoka as a Ruler

Ashoka was one of India's most illustrious rulers. Ashoka's inscriptions carved on rocks and stone pillars constitute the second set of dated historical records. Some of the inscriptions state that in the aftermath of the destruction resulting from the war against the powerful kingdom of Kalinga (Orissa), Ashoka renounced bloodshed and started following a policy of nonviolence or Ahimsa. His sense of toleration for different religious beliefs reflected the realities of India's regional pluralism, although he personally followed Buddhism. Early Buddhist texts state that he convened a Buddhist council at his capital, regularly undertook tours within his realm and sent Buddhist, missionary ambassadors to Sri Lanka. India's north-west retained many Persian cultural elements, which might explain Ashoka's rock inscriptions—such inscriptions were commonly associated with the Persian rulers. Ashoka's Greek and Aramaic inscriptions discovered in Kandhar in Afghanistan may also reveal his inclination to maintain contacts with people outside India.

Extent of the Empire

Ashoka's Empire covered the entire territory from Hindukush to Bengal and extended over Afghanistan, Baluchistan and the whole of India with the exception of a small area in the farthest south. Kashmir and the valleys of Nepal were also included. It was the biggest Indian empire and Ashoka was the first Indian king who ruled over almost the whole of India.



MAP 1.7 Edicts of Ashokan Empire

The Kalinga War

This was an important war during Ashoka's rule, which changed his attitude towards life. In 265 BC, Ashoka invaded Kalinga (Orissa) and occupied it after widespread destruction and bloodshed. Kalinga was an important empire as it controlled the land and the sea routes to South India. This led to Ashoka becoming a follower of Buddhism. His increased pre-occupation in the religion and emphasis on non-violence led to the weakening of his administration, which slowly led to the decline of the Mauryan Empire.

Ashoka's Policy of Dhamma

The diverse nature of the vast empire under Ashoka was exposed to social tensions and sectarian conflicts. Ashoka devised the policy of dhamma, which later became famous, as it promoted a harmonious relationship between the diverse elements of the empire. The supposed essence of dhamma seems to be the genesis of Ashoka's big idea. The word dhamma is a Prakrit spelling of the more familiar dharma, a concept difficult to translate but imbued with positives and idealised connotations in both orthodox Vedic literature and in the heterodox doctrines of Buddhists, Jain and Ajivikas. Invoking a natural order within which all manners of creation had its place and its role, it was something to which no one, whether Brahmin or Buddhist, emperor or slave, could reasonably take exception.

Dhamma had tolerance, as its basis was aiming to bring out a peace loving life within the family and society. Religious and cultural meetings and festivals were banned led functions were allowed. Dhamma also emphasised non-violence. Ashoka banned observance of useless rituals and ceremonies to cut down the influence of priests and religious leaders. He defined the code of duty based on practical ideas like daya (mercy), Dana (charity), sathya (truthfulness), namrata (gentleness) and souche (purity). These codes entered into internal politics as well as international relations too. Ashoka attempted no philosophical justification of dhamma, nor was he given to rationalising it. It was neither a belief system nor a developed ideology, just a set of behavioural exhortations. But, because behaviour and conduct was of such defining importance, any attempt to alter it was indeed revolutionary. Ashoka, therefore, needed good reason for introducing dhamma and it should

perhaps be sought in the need to promote a more united and uniform society. Ashoka's Empire was divided into provinces, with a viceroy in each province. He established dharamsalas, hospitals and sarais throughout his kingdom. Dharma Mahapatras were appointed to preach the people. Buddhism was spread during his reign as a state religion and inscriptions of Buddhist principles were engraved on rocks. He organised a network of missionaries to preach the doctrine, both in his kingdom and beyond. Ashoka sent missionaries to Ceylon, Burma and other south-east Asian regions, notably Thailand to spread the doctrine of Buddhism.

Successors of Ashoka

After Ashoka's death in 232 BC, the empire gradually disintegrated, though the exact causes are not clear. A period of struggle for succession ensued between Ashoka's heirs; southern princes seceded, from the empire and foreign powers invaded. The empire contracted to the Ganges valley in northern India. The last king of the Mauryan Empire was **Brihadratha**, who was assassinated by his Senapati, **Pushyamitra Sunga**, in 184 BC. There were six kings who ruled between Ashoka and Brihadratha. Only **Dasratha**, Ashoka's immediate successor was of some significance.

The Mauryan Dynasty

Chandragupta Maurya (320-300 BC)
Bindusara (300-273 BC.)
Ashoka (269-232 BC)
Dasaratha Kunala (232-226 BC)
Samprati (226-215 BC)
Salishoka (215-202 BC)
Devavorma (202-195 BC)
Satdhanvan (195-191 BC)
Brihadratha (181-180 BC)

Languages and Scripts of Ashoka's Inscriptions

The earliest deciphered inscriptions in the subcontinent are the edicts issued by the Mauryan Ashoka, inscribed on rock surfaces and pillars, from the third century BC. The earlier script of third millennium BC—The Harappa script, associated with the Indus Valley Civilization—is generally believed to be pictographic and is found on seals, amulets and occasionally, as graffiti on pots. However, as these pictographs to be deciphered Ashoka's edicts are historically scripts available for study.

Delhi-Topra Pillar Edict

Thus said, His Sacted and Gracious Majesty the king: On the high roads, I caused banyan trees to be planted by me to shade cattle and men. I caused mango gardens to be planted and wells to be dug at two-mile intervals, rest-houses were constructed, many watering stations were established here and there, for the comfort of cattle and men. Slight comfort, indeed, is this, People have been made happy through various kinds of facilities for comfort by previous kings as well as me. But this was done by me so that people might strictly follow the path laid down by Dharma.

Eight Groups of Ashoka's Edicts/ Inscriptions

Ashoka's edicts/inscriptions may be arranged in eight groups chronological order:

- (i) Two minor rock edicts (258-257 BC)
- (ii) Babru edicts (257 BC)
- (iii) Fourteen rock edicts (257-256 BC)

- (iv) Kalinga inscriptions (256 BC)
- (v) Barabar rock edicts in caves near Gaya (250 BC)
- (vi) Tarai's two minor pillar edicts (249 BC)
- (vii) Seven pillar edicts (243 BC)
- (viii) Four minor pillar edicts (232 BC)



Ashoka as an Administrator

A devout Buddhist, Ashok did not neglect public works or administration. Although he retained capital punishment for extreme offences, he devised a system of appeals to give every chance for a revised judgement that might replace execution with a fine. He reformed the tax system so that each region and village could appeal for relief when harvests and commerce had declined, reorganised bureaucracy and devised a new class of officials, the mahamatras, literally meaning 'great in measure'. They were established to monitor the operations of the government. Some were assigned to look after the welfare of the Sangha, and they even travelled outside the realm to do so. Others saw to the well-being of other religious sects. They reported directly to Ashoka, who took interest in the details of his empire. Ashoka established rest-houses, dug wells, planted trees and founded hospitals along major roads. He promulgated rules for the protection of cows, forbade animal sacrifices and abolished hunting for sport. He replaced the royal hunt with the royal pilgrimage and visited Bodh Gaya and many other sacred sites.

The inscriptions mark the transition from the oral tradition to literacy, though the date of this transition remains uncertain. The scripts used for engraving the edicts are all

phonetic and, therefore, mark a departure from the earlier pictographic script. Some scholars maintain that the Mauryas invented a script to facilitate administration and enable faster communication with distant places and frontier zones. But the invention of scripts is more often associated with the trading communities. The invention must have proceeded the reign of Ashoka because he used it extensively and presumably there were people who could read the edicts, though he did insist that his officers read them out to his subjects. The inscriptions were generally located in places likely to attract people.

Ashoka's inscriptions use three different languages and four scripts. The most important and the largest in number are composed in Prakrit, but Ashoka also had a few inscribed in Greek and Aramaic. The scripts used for the Prakrit inscriptions were Brahmi and Kharoshthi, and for the others, Greek and Aramaic. The Greek and Aramaic inscriptions are all close together near Kabul and Kandhar in Afghanistan. The script and language were in use before the reign of Ashoka as Greek and Aramaic speaking people had settled in this region. The province of Gandhara (present day Peshawar and its vicinity) was part of the Iranian Achaemenid Empire in the sixth century BC and, therefore, would have used Aramaic. It was included in the Mauryan Empire in the fourth century along with the adjoining territories in Afghanistan which were ceded by the Hellenistic King Seleucus Nicator—Alexander's successor in Iran—to the Mauryan king Chandragupta at the conclusion of a campaign; hence, the presence of the Greek speaking people. One Ashokan inscription is bilingual (Greek and Aramaic) and suggests that bilingualism in these languages was common in these parts.

The importance of the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions, apart from their locations, also lies in their providing translations of some of the significant terms used in the Prakrit inscriptions, the readings of which have been controversial. For example, the Prakrit term *dhumma* is the same as the Sanskrit *dharma* and has no exact equivalent in English. It has been variously rendered as piety, virtue, sacred duty or even as the *dharma* taught by Buddha. It is translated as *eusebeia* the Greek inscriptions, suggesting a more general use because there is no reference to Buddha in the Greek and Aramaic versions.

The more important inscriptions, much larger in number and inscribed in various parts of the subcontinent, were composed in Prakrit and engraved in two different scripts— Brahmi and Kharoshthi, Inscriptions in Kharoshthi are all clustered in the north west, again suggestive of being read locally. Kharoshthi derives from Aramaic and is written from right to left. The letters, although conforming to the Prakrit alphabet, recall many Aramaic forms. Initially limited to the vicinity of Peshawar, in the post-Mauryan period, Kharoshthi travelled further a field and especially into central Asia.

The script with the maximum usage and historical potential was Brahmi, which was to become the standard script of the subcontinent in post-Mauryan times, although undergoing the usual evolution of a widely used script. It was written from left to right, consisted of carefully formed letters and was relatively easy to read. There has been a continuing debate as to its origin. Some support a source that permitted admixtures of letters from the Greek, or the Phoenician or Semitic scripts, and others argue in favour of an independent process of inventing letters in India. The resemblances of some letters to neighbouring scripts cannot be denied and it

was probably an efficient working out as well as borrowing of forms, appropriate and accessible to those needing a script.

The extensive use of Prakrit in the subcontinent did not rigidly follow the original composition. The edicts were issued by the king from the capital or the royal camp, but were adapted to some forms of local usage when actually engraved. The language and the script had a pliancy that could reflect, to a small degree, variations, influenced by local linguistic inflections. Certain sounds, such as 'l' or 'r' were interchanged, occasional spelling mistakes occurred as also slippages in either fitting a word into a space or inadvertently leaving out a letter, and there were minor variations in words or the use of a term that was more familiar locally. Inscriptions were composed by rulers and officials at the court, but the actual engraving was done by professional engravers, who were of low rank and whose literacy level may have been barely adequate. A group of Ashokan inscriptions from Karnataka in southern India carry the briefest of statements at the end of the royal edict, naming the engraver as *Capada*. Interestingly, this little statement is in Kharoshthi whereas the rest of the edict is in Brahmi. It is unclear whether the engraver was brought from the north-west or whether he was demonstrating his knowledge of more than one script. The edicts inscribed on rock surfaces in Karnataka were many, for it was a gold-bearing area that appears to have been worked by the Mauryan state. Curiously, this was a Dravidian-speaking area with no prior script, yet the edicts are all composed in Prakrit—(at this time a North Indian Indo-Aryan language)—and engraved in Brahmi. Officers were expected to read out the edicts and translate them to the local population. No attempt was made to render the edicts in the local language as was done in the

north-west with Greek and Aramaic, perhaps because there was no local script. In the political assessment of the region, it was probably less important than the north-west, being an area of clans and chiefdoms rather than states and kingdoms. The intention may have been to make literacy a statement of power in an oral society and this is perhaps how the inscriptions were also viewed. This is also suggested by the earliest use of a script for engraving inscriptions in Tamil—the most widely used Dravidian language in South India. The script used was an adaptation from the Mauryan Brahmi script and current in the second century BC.

The edicts inscribed on rock surfaces are addressed to various categories of people—a few to Buddhist monks in various monasteries, some addressed specifically to the officers of the state and the majority addressed to the people at large. Those of the first category are concerned with matters relating to Buddhist practice and monastic procedures. The remaining two categories relate to the welfare of his subjects, through what Ashoka perceived as better administration and even more so through a deliberate cultivation of social responsibility. The latter was deeply influenced by Buddhist ethics, but was not merely a call his subjects to follow the teachings of Buddha. Although personally a Buddhist, Ashoka was well aware of his role as a statesman ruling a multicultural empire.

The various categories of rock engraved edicts were issued in the earlier part of his reign. Towards the latter part, a special collection of edicts was scribed on pillars. Addressed to his subjects, he recapitulated his contribution to their welfare and further advised them of which behaviour. These pillar edicts, as they have been called, were engraved with finesse and care on specially cut, polished

sandstone pillars and are located in various parts of the Ganges Valley. These make a dramatic contrast to the more rough-hewn rock surfaces of the earlier inscriptions and show a distinct improvement in the handling of the script.

The tone of the Ashokan edicts is conversational and could have been an attempt to link the oral tradition to literacy, and to 'speak to the subjects. This was again an unusual perception of the use of a script by a king who was attempting to establish an unusual relationship with his subjects.



Ashoka as Dharmaraja

Whether Ashoka was transformed all at once, or whether the impact of his conquest affected him over time, it had two radical consequences. Spiritually, he became a follower of the Buddha dharma, the teachings of Buddha. Politically, he renounced war and conquest as acceptable methods for preserving the empire and sought to replace them with the inculcation of Dharma. He synthesised these: two commitments in a three-fold devotion to dharma: *dharma-palana* (protection), *dharma-karma* (action according to Dharma and instruction, in Dharma) and *dharma-nushishi* (protection of Dharma, action according to Dharma and instruction, in Dharma). Rather than follow in the footsteps of his grandfather and renounce the world, his understanding of Dharma held him responsible for the welfare of all his subjects, and he translated this general duty into an attempt to exemplify *dharma-rāja*, the rule of Dharma. Long after his specific policies and works were forgotten, Buddhist tradition revered him as the first and ideal *Dharma-rāja*—the Buddhist counterpart of the Hindu idea of the *Chakravartin* and bestowed upon

him the name of Dharmashaka.

Remembering Ashoka

Ashoka's Empire soon passed out of memory. However, the ideal he upheld as Arya-putr (prince) and Dharma-putra (son of Dharma) increased in lustre with each passing epoch. Generations which could not recollect the Mauryans, not point out the boundaries of their realm, nor even read the edicts, nonetheless remembered the great king, 'beloved of gods', who taught Dharma and lived what he espoused who had set the standard against which subsequent rulers were measured and often found wanting, and who had promulgated a simple yet fundamental doctrine of tolerance and civility based upon respect for the spiritual aspirations of all people to adhere to the Dharma, they recalled that there had been a minor golden age and know that it was possible for human beings to experience a golden age again.

Dharmarajya and Ashoka

Dharmarajya, as Ashoka understood it, permitted him to be devoted to Buddha's teaching, but to revere and support the Sangha, it required him as a monarch to nurture and support all religious traditions in his realm. To this end, he inscribed edicts throughout the empire, exhorting the people to practise Dharma, but kept the explicit content of that concept sufficiently universal to include Hindu, Jain, Ajivaka and other interpretations of it. Although he gave land, food and money to the Buddhist Sangha, he similarly supported other

spiritual traditions. Thus, the Pillar Edicts mention gifts to the Sangha and the Cave inscriptions deed sites to the Ajivakas. Legend maintains that a third Buddhist council was convened in his reign and that he laboured intensely to preserve the unity of the Sangha—an effort that ultimately failed—but the edicts speak only of purifying the order. Scholars tend to believe that no third council took place, or that Ashoka had little to do with it, but the absence of detailed testimony in the edicts may only show that he saw no value in recounting publicly his role in the inner affairs of the Sangha.

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