

EMPEROR ASHOKA, HIS LEGACY AND SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

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Introduction: Emperor Ashoka was placed as one of the greatest ruler and historical personalities of the ancient world by historians like H.G Wells and thinkers like Shri Arobindo. He was first and foremost political as well as spiritual patron of Buddhism. It is significant to note that in his attempt to alter the "Dharma" of the community, he proceeded not merely by his royal decrees but by dialogue and assemblies. Due to his planning, organized strategies and vision, Buddhism spread inside and outside India. Thus he assumed two titles viz: "Devanamapiya" and "Piyadassi" for glorification of his contributions towards Buddhism.

Objectives: The paper aims at examining the following questions with reference to relationship between Ashoka and Buddhism:

- What was the status of Buddhism prior to Ashoka?
- What motivated him to adopt and propagate Buddhism at such a large scale?
- What are the historical sources for understanding his role in the propagation of Buddhism?
- How and to what extent he was an ideal Buddhist king?
- What was the extent of the spread of Buddhism under his rule?
- What was his mechanism and nature of propagation?
- What is Ashokan legacy of Buddhism for the modern world?

These questions are to be evaluated one by one, within the historical limitations of the resources available to us. Symposium paper presented at National University of Mongolia, in "Mongolian and Chinese Cultural Symposium", organized and collaborated by National University of Mongolia, Shandong University, China and Institute of Philosophy and Social Development, Ulaanbaatar, on 17-06-2011

Previous status: Prior to Ashoka, Buddhism emerged as a major Indian view refuting 62 Pre-Buddhist views and six major heretical schools as depicted in Brahmajala Sutta and Sammannaphala Sutta of the Pali Nikayas. The unflinching zeal of the Buddha and the Sangha established by him resulted to its spread in the Mauryan Empire and ancient Indian Republics.

Outputs of the first two Buddhist councils at Rajgriha and Vaishali respectively consolidated the "Buddha Vacana". It had already been classified into Pitakas, Nikayas, Angas and Dharma Skandas. Lokottarvadin conception of the Buddha nature was fully developed. Due to the move of Mahasanghikas during second Buddhist council, Buddhism was divided into 18 sects.

Motivation for the spread: As per the Thirteenth rock edict at the end of the 8th year of his reign, he waged a devastating war against Kalinga. The horrific plight of the war moved the victorious emperor and he decided to undertake no war policy. He abandoned war and adopted the policy based on "Dhamma", i.e. his basic understanding about Buddhism. He was initiated to Buddhism by Thera Moggaliputta

Tissa, who also presided over the third Buddhist council. He along with Ashoka planned for dispatching Buddhist missionaries in various nations for spreading his understanding of Dhamma and Buddhism.

Resources for Analysis: The Historical resources for understanding Ashoka's role for Buddhism can be classified into Ashokan edicts and literary sources. Ashokan inscriptions can be divided into eight parts viz:

- 1) Minor rock edicts
- 2) Bhabru rock edicts
- 3) Fourteen rock edicts
- 4) Two Kaling rock edicts
- 5) Three cave edicts
- 6) Two Plain Pillar edicts
- 7) Seven pillar edicts
- 8) Three minor pillar edicts

There were two scripts used viz: Brahmi and Kharoshti for these inscriptions. These edicts were like reading materials for masses to cultivate moral virtues, such as the observance of truth, restraint, kindness, charity, purity, gentleness, respect for elders and liberality to friends, etc. as advocated in the Sigalovada Sutta. He wanted all religious denominations to desist from self-praise and condemnation of others. The rock edicts are mostly to be found in places at the periphery of his vast empire and the pillar edicts along high roads or at places of mass gatherings.

The literary sources are Ceylonese chronicles viz: Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Thupavamsa and other sources in Pali, Sanskrit and Chinese languages. The Chinese source is called 'Asokavadana A-yu-wang-chuan' by An-Fa Chin of the western Tsin Dynasty. There are many other versions of the works in Chinese reflecting his contributions and spread of Buddhism.

Ideal Buddhist King: Ashoka switched over from the amoral maxims of power worked out by Kautilya in his "Arthashastra" to the ethical social programme proposed by the Buddha. He found he was sincere. Whatever problems he faced as emperor, he believed Buddhism 'Offered' what was needed to solve them. He made non-violence as his primary principle of conduct along with the truth. Nevertheless, he was bold enough to attempt a synthesis of the best ethical elements of all religions. He gave us a fairly clear idea of all the four elements of the Mauryan state viz: population, territory, sovereignty and government. He established functions and aims, methods and strategies, foreign relations and policies of the state, the constitution and machineries of his government and his achievement through it. As Buddha is known as the propounder of the middle path. Its application as a method of governance was applied by Ashoka. Ashoka established a tradition, where the king as Cakravarti world Conqueror is the coordinating counterpart of a 'Bodhisatta'.

In the first eleven years of his rule, he visited Buddhist pilgrim sites and propagated Dhamma. He directed high officials to visit in his region every five years and establish ethical code. He also appointed Dharma Mahamatras as well as often organized religious dialogues. He aspired to fill the role of a Dhamma-raja, with the Dhamma as his banner, standard and overlord. Dhamma was to him an ideal of culture to be translated into those qualities of personality which serve to elevate life in its practical and pragmatic sphere. Thus he proved himself to be an ideal Buddhist King.

Spread of Buddhism: Ashokas' patronage have constituted to the spread of Buddhism far and wide, so as to spread the outputs of the third Buddhist council. The president of the council Moggaliputta Tissa converted Yavan (Greeks) and selected a Greek elder, Dharmarakshita for missionary work. As per 13ⁿ Rock edict, he dispatched missionaries to those of king Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy of Egypt, Antigonos of Macedonia, Alexander of Epirus, Magas of Cyrenia, in North Africa, The names of Kambojas, Pandyas, Cholas, Andhras, Pulindas, Ceylone etc, were also mentioned.

In specific Mahendra and Sanghamitra, the son and daughter of Ashoka established Buddhism in Ceylon. Thera Majhantika worked in Kashmir and Gandhar (Afganistan), Thera Majhima devoted his efforts in Himalayan range, Thera Sona and Uttar went to 'Suvarna Bhumi' and so on. It is said that in all these lands he had opened hospitals both for man and beasts, had dug wells and tanks, planted trees and performed such other philanthropic works for all people. In sharp contradiction to the Semitic faiths, for Buddhism, 'dana' is the service not of human beings alone but of animals too this was popularized by Ashoka. Such practices and principles were adopted by various nations such as China. The setting birds and turtles free had become integral part of Chinese Buddhist festivals. So his efforts were largely responsible for popularization of Buddhism inside and outside India i.e. various parts of Asia, Europe and North Africa.

Plan of the spread: It is assumed that the Plan of the spread of Buddhism was charted out during the third Buddhist council under the leadership of Thera Moggaliputta Tissa, however the object of the council basically was purging the Sangha of Heretics, where 60 000 heretics were spotted by their refusal to subscribe to Vibhajjavada of Theravad school. Some historians raised doubt about Ashokas involvement in the said council and canon based Dhamma. the argument however is superfluous. Because the 'Dhamma' propagated through the edicts are by and large based on the canons. On the basis of 84000 'Dhatus' of the Buddha and further on "Dharma-Skandhas", he had constructed 84000 'Chaityas' and 'Viharas' respectively. Wherever he deployed his envoys or missionaries he had performed many philanthropic works in foreign lands with the collaboration and help of the natives and rulers of those lands. The content of his edicts may be indexed as follows:

1. Forbidding slaughters of animals, sacredness of all life.
2. Establishments for the dispensing of medicines for man and for beasts.

3. Duties of Royal Executive officers. Instructions to be given by the council.
4. Practice of the Dhamma.
5. Appointment of Superintendents of Dhamma and their duties.
6. Prompt dispatch of the business of State.
7. Equality of all men of all sects, except in their striving for perfection.
8. Change in the nature of Kings pleasure.
9. Virtue is better than ceremonials.
10. Fame does not bring gain, but good deeds make one free from evil inclinations.
11. The highest gift is the gift of the Dhamma.
12. By tolerance of other sects one benefits one's own sect.

Ashoka made use of the channels of communication, both commercial and diplomatic between India and Greece. Legends in Burma and Thailand say that Ashoka sent his mission to those countries too. He sent his daughter to Ceylon with a branch of Bodhi tree, planted in Mahaodhavana of Anuradha pura, where it still survives as the oldest historical tree in the world.

Legacy: Thus Ashoka left his appreciable legacy in the field of the concept of 'Dhammaraja' (Ideal King); in social service and philanthropic works; in secular administration; as a patron of Dhamma and religious propagation by peaceful means; in the field of international relation and diplomacy by giving creative interpretation and scope of the principle of Pancasila, which was adopted by the present Indian government as their policy of foreign affairs. The rulers of the countries influenced by Buddhism further adopted his model of kingship to a large extent; with all these attributes and activities he tried to justify the two titles viz: 'Devanamapiya' and 'Piyadassi'. So his contributions towards the spread of Buddhism and his being one of the greatest benevolent ruler of the world history are well established.

Legacy of Ashoka for the spread of Buddhism was followed not only by rulers like Kanishka, Gupta Emperors and Harshavardhana but monks and scholars of Buddhist Mahaviharas like Nalanda, Vikramasila and Valabhi too had played important role in it. Buddhism entered in China during 1st century B.C. to 1st A.D and further into other nations of East, South East, Central Asia and other parts of the world and influenced their culture and civilization to a great extent.

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