

Observations on Aśoka's Prescription for Sectarian Harmony

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Aśoka has been acclaimed as one of the greatest kings in the history of the world. His fame, however, does not rest so much in the fact that he was master of the most extensive empire in ancient India, for in history there have been some more kings who ruled over even much larger areas. It primarily is due to the fact that he was a king who strived hard for the material and spiritual welfare not only of his subjects but also of the people living in the domains of other rulers. He formulated a code of conduct for people to follow which he termed *dhamma* (*dharma*). It contained teachings as are met with in all higher religions and which aim at making a man better man, and a society in which each category of people could properly fulfil their obligations to other categories of people, such as a son towards his parents, a pupil towards his teacher, a master towards his servants and slaves.

In the present paper we intend to limit ourselves to only one aspect of his religious policy, the one directed towards maintenance of religious harmony amongst different sects and the 'growth of essentials' of different religions. This is based primarily on one of his inscriptions, namely his Rock Edict XII¹, which in ten lines gives the salient features of Aśoka's policy as to what should be done and what should not be done in order to create religious harmony. Some light is also thrown on this subject from his Rock Edict VII² and Pillar Edict VI³.

Rock Edict XII begins with the statement that King Priyadarśī, Beloved of the gods (*Devānāmpriya*) honours all sects as also all householders (*grhasthas*) and ascetics (*pravrajitas*), to whichever sect they were attached to, with gift and manifold honour. It may be stated that in most of his inscriptions the king refers to himself as *Devānām priya* or/and Priyadarśī, and the name Aśoka occurs only on a few inscriptions, all of which come under Minor Rock Edicts. The reference to the honour to the householders and the ascetics has been made because, as we will see below, the Edict concerns both of them, and also because Aśoka was always keen to earn the goodwill of both these categories of people which

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he deemed essential for the good running of government and for spiritual uplift of people. That he deemed both categories of people important is also seen from the fact that he in the same phraseology has shown respect to both of them in his Pillar Edict VI, which was issued in his twenty-sixth regnal year.

After showing honour to the ascetics and the householders and offering them gifts, Aśoka tells that he does not consider liberality (*dāna*) and honour of such a great importance as growth of essentials (*sāravadhī*) of all religions.⁴

He further says that growth of essentials is of various kinds, but the root of it is restraint of speech (*vacigutī*). He explains what he means by restraint of speech in the context of religion by telling that there should not be any exhibition of honour towards one's own sect (*ātapa-pāsaṃḍa-pūjā*) and condemnation of another's sect (*para-pāsaṃḍa-pūjā*) and condemnation of another's sect (*para-pāsaṃḍa-garahā*) without proper occasion (*prakarṇa*). He realized that the main cause of religious intolerance and fanaticism is the tendency of certain people to assert that their religion alone is worthy of honour and all other religions are worthless. But Aśoka also knew that it is natural for a person to be attached to his own religion and to exhibit honour to it, and also that this is difficult to be curbed. He was also aware that there are certain fruitless rituals performed and useless superstitions held by the followers of most of the religious sects which need to be discarded, and therefore it would not be advisable to put a complete ban on their criticism. He himself in Rock Edict IX⁵ is critical of blind faith and superstitious beliefs held by the people and the useless rituals performed by them 'in sickness, at marriages, on the birth of offspring and on journey'. He does not specify followers of which religious sects perform which rituals, or which religions are most notorious for performing largest number of rituals, perhaps because this was the feature more or less of all the religious sects, as also because he felt it would be better not to name any religious sects, as that would antagonise the followers of those sects (or those sects). He was quite keen that people should give up superstitious beliefs and useless rituals, which (the latter) consumed a lot of time, energy and money, are fruitless and bring no good to their performers. He had decreed in Rock Edict I⁶ that no animal should be killed for sacrifice. Here it is clear that he is mainly targeting *Vedic* Brahmanical religion in which animal sacrifice is a quite common practice; yet here also he purposely avoids to name the religious sect in which the practice was in vogue. He realized that criticism of others' sect as also exhibition of honour to one's own sect may not be entirely ruled out, But he puts certain condition of honour to one's own sect may not be entirely ruled out. But he puts certain conditions, which ought to be followed while making criticism, or exhibiting honour to one's

own sect. The first condition is that these two acts should be done only at proper occasion, and not any time and every time. The second and more important condition in this respect is that they should be done in small measure (*lahukā*), that is it should be mild and polite. This in fact is what he means by 'restraint of speech' (*vacigutī*). He knew that all out condemnation of another's sect, even if done on carefully chosen suitable occasion (*prakaraṇa*), would escalate the tension between the followers of those who condemn the religion and those whose religion is condemned and that would severely damage communal harmony which would be harmful for the society as well as for the state.

The above gives us an idea of what Aśoka tells people not to do for suspising communal harmony, viz. not to exhibit honour to one's own sect or condemn others' sect without occasion or on a large scale. Then in the same edict (ie Rock Edict XII), he prescribes what should be done to the same end in view. He says : 'sects of other people should be honoured on different occasions'. What has he in mind when he says different occasions ? Perhaps he means that on the celebration of festivities marking some holy days relating to a religious sect, the followers of other sects may join them and extend greetings to them. And what would be the gain by doing so ? He says by doing so there is two-fold gain, namely, one would be promoting one's own sect and also would be doing good to the sect of others. He also tells what is the disadvantage in doing the opposite of it. He says that one who honours one's own sect and condemns another's sect, because of his attachment for his own sect (*ātapa-pāsaṃḍa-bhariya*), believing that by doing so one may make his own sect shine, causes more harm to one's own sect (*ātapa-pāsaṃḍam bādhataram upahanāti*).

Aśoka praises religious concord (*samavāya eva sādhu*) and lays great emphasis on it and on the growth of essentials (*sāraṇadhī*) of all religions, which he considers as the basis of ideal religious policy. He realised that the negative way of non-concern and indifference towards another's religion is not the ideal way of achieving religious harmony, as that would mean depriving men of the noble teachings of different religions, which should be the heritage of all the people. He perceived that if people get acquainted with the religious teachings of other sects then they would become well informed about them. They would realise that every religion has two main aspects, namely doctrinal and ethical⁷. Under doctrinal matters relating to theology and rituals, and in both of these there would be considerable difference between different religious sects. 'So far, however, as the ethical side of a religion is concerned, there is no divergence, no conflict, but perfect unanimity' between different religions⁸. Thus there is fundamental unity in the ethical teaching of all sects, which in fact are the common property of all religions. They are the essence of all religions and it is

their growth which Aśoka labels as 'growth of essentials' (*sāravadhī*), and which he considers much more important than liberality (*dāna*) and showing honour (*pūjā*). In fact the *Dhamma* (dharma) of Aśoka, which according to him comprises such qualities as mercy (*dayā*), liberality (*dāna*), truth (*sacē*) and purity (*socaye*),⁹ is based on the essence of all religions.

The perception of Aśoka that there is unanimity in the ethical teachings of all religions would have been the result of his deep acquaintance with the teachings of different religions, for which there is some evidence available. In all probability, he was a follower of Brahmanical faith before he became a Buddhist, and as such he would have been conversant with Brahmanical teachings. As a Buddhist, there is no doubt he had studied all important Buddhist texts available in his time, as one can infer from his selection of certain passages from some important Buddhist works such as *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya* and *Sutta-nipāta*, 10¹⁰ which he has prescribed in his Bhabru inscription (also known as Bairat inscription)¹¹ for the Buddhist clergy as well as laity to study. His mother is said to have been a follower of the Ājīvika sect and he would have learnt about that religion from his mother and perhaps also from her preceptor. An Ājīvika ascetic predicted the future of Aśoka when his mother conceived him, and another Ājīvika ascetic did the same when she gave birth to him^{11a}. He himself granted three rock-cut caves in Barabara hills in Gaya district as residences to the Ājīvika, as per evidence of his inscriptions on the walls of the caves.¹² Jaina religion was almost as popular as Buddhism and he must have been acquainted with the tenets of that religion. His illustrious grand father, Candragupta, is said to have become a follower of Jainism in the later years of his reign, turned a wandering ascetic, and as a devout Jaina, gave up his life by fast unto death. Aśoka would have been acquainted with the religious ideas of the Greeks, who should have been present in his court at Pāṭaliputra, and comprised most of the foreign population there, which, as per evidence of Megasthenes, was taken care of by a separate Municipal committee. During Candragupta's reign the Greek ruler Seleucos invaded Indian territories and failing in his adventure ceded four satrapies lying beyond the north-western boundary of the Mauryan empire and sent Megasthenes as ambassador to the mauryan court at Pāṭaliputra. There was matrimonial alliance between the two kings and in all probability a Greek princess was married to Candragupta or more probably to his son Bindusāra. There is a view that not only Aśoka would have met greek lady (or ladies) in the harem, but even Greek blood ran through his veins.¹³ Bindusāra is known to have requested a Greek ruler to send a philosopher to his court. There were also a number of Greeks at Taxila, a great centre of trade and learning. There would have been followers of different religious sects in the court of Aśoka.

In Rock Edict XII, Aśoka expresses his desire that people following different sects should listen to the tenets of each other's sect, which will make them well informed (*bahusrutā*), and this will be conducive to their good (*kalāṅgamā*). So much concerned is Aśoka about the growth of essentials of all religious sects, that at the end of the Edict he repeats what he had said at the beginning of it, namely that he does not value charity or honour so much as the growth of essentials.

Aśoka was shrewd enough to realise that merely telling people that the king wants such and such thing to be done would not bring desired fruit, for people may follow his suggestions for sometime and thereafter may become lax in doing so. He therefore tried to find out ways and means to remind people at short intervals about the importance of the growth of essentials of all religions and maintenance of communal harmony. He decided to take the help of a vast mass of his officials throughout his dominion in this connection. He assigned this task to the *dharma-mahāmātras* (high officials in charge of *dharma*), *stryadhyakṣy-mahāmātras* (high officials in charge of the welfare of women), *vracabhūmikas* (officer in charge of royal pasture and royal cattle), and other officials as stated in Pillar Edict VII,¹⁴ who would be doing this work in addition to their normal official duties.¹⁵ It may be mentioned that of these the *dharma-mahāmātras* were specially suited for this purpose, as Pillar Edict VII states that they 'have been occupied in various matters of grace, with the ascetics and the householders and with all sects'. Now as seen above, rock Edict XII deals with sectarian harmony and begins with Aśoka's honouring the ascetics and householders and offering them gifts. Both the categories were under the jurisdiction of this class of officials. They would have conveniently motivated and reminded people to follow king's instructions in regards to religious harmony and growth of essentials of all religious sects.

Thus we have seen Aśoka's statement in the Rock Edict XII regarding what he wants the followers of different sects to follow in religious matters, viz. They should not without occasion exhibit their honour for their own sect and not condemn others' sect without proper occasion, and that they should honour other sects on proper occasions. He has also told why he wants people to do so, namely that by doing so there will be growth of essentials of all religions and one would be doing good to his own sect as well as to the sect of other. He has also told as to what measures he has taken to see that people continue to follow his policy, by assigning the task to *dharma-mahāmātras* and other Officers to motivate and remind people of their duty in this regard. He must have felt that ultimately people would like to know as to what extent, if at all, efforts in this direction have borne fruit. And he gives information in the

same edict that the efforts have achieved success and there has been exaltation of one's own sect and the shining of the *dhamma* (*dharma*). The publicity given to such result would have convinced people of the efficacy of the policy and would have provide further motivation for acting in accordance with king's desire.

From the contents of Rock Edict XII, we can infer that during the reign of Aśoka there were a number of sects and also that there was considerable intersect revalry, causing distrubance in the religious harmony and perhaps also in the law and order situation. The Edict mentions four sects by name, namely Brahmanical, Buddhists, jaina and Ājīvika. A large number of sects are known as thriving during the time of the Buddha (6th century BC), and some of them might have continued and a few might have been added to them by the time of Aśoka. Not unoften there were debates, which was a most common practice in ancient India and continues on a lesser scale even today. They were generally arranged to establish superiority of one's learning over another's, or the superiority of the doctrines of one's religion over the doctrines of another's, or the superiority of the doctrines of one's religion over the doctrines of another's religion. Naturally, in sectarian debate one would try his best to eulogise his own religion and criticize, revile and condemn that of others'. In some cases, sectarian debates took the shape of 'acrimonious wrangling', and not unoften turned into heated exchanges of words and even of abusive language, which led to sharp bickerings and much animosity between different sects. Aśoka would have been very much pained with the interesection rivalry and religious bickerings. He was very keen to maintain religious harmony, and therefore emphasized on ethical rather than the doctrinal, aspect of religions in which there was uniformity between different religions, and hardly any scope for heated debate. Secondly, as seen above, he prescribed certain dos and don'ts to the followers of different sects, which, he believed, when followed, would lead to religious harmony. It may also be stated that the passages or chapters he prescribed for he Buddhist monks and laity to study comprise such teachings of the Buddha as are met with in the teachings of practically all the religions. Thus Aśoka as a buddhist set an example as to how one could contribute to the growth of essentials', which he lauds so high and considers more important than liberality (*dāna*) and honour (*pūjā*)

In the Rock Edict VII, Aśoka declares that folowers of any sect were free to dwell anywhere within his kingdom. It would not be wrong to infer from this that during the time of the mauryan king, there were some localities, in some cases whole villages and in others, pockets within cities and towns, exclusively inhabited by the followers of a particular sect who would not allow followers of other sects to settle there. Aśoka did not like such an

attitude of the people, and therefore made it clear that no body should create any hurdle in the way of any person belonging to any sect, intending to settle at any place. He gives person as to why he is making such a declaration. He says he is doing so because he believes that all the religious sects preach self-restraint (*saṁyama*) and purity of heart (*bhāva-sudhi*, i.e. *bhāva-śuddhi*.) May be he thought it necessary to give reason for such a declaration, lest some one considers that it was made under pressure from some religious groups.

In the time of Aśoka, it appears that leaving one's sect and joining that of another's was not an uncommon practice. In some cases, when the leader of a particular sect would join another sect, generally all his followers followed him. At times the leader of one sect became the follower of the leader of another sect as on being vanquished by him in debate. His followers, at least in some cases, did not have the idea as to what were the teachings of the sect they were joining. There were also other types of mass conversion. In a Jātaka,¹⁶ there is a reference to a unique case of the inhabitants of a village changing their religion *en mass* four times within a short period.¹⁷ This decision would have been taken by the head of the village, with or without the village council, for all the villagers. There could have also been a few cases of forced conversions. Aśoka did not like such conversions. He wanted that each individual should first know the teachings of different sects and then himself decide as to which sect he should join. He expresses this view in Pillar Edict VI, where he says the joining of a particular sect by a person should be voluntary (*atanā pacūpagamana*).¹⁸

Sectarian rivalry and animosity had been there throughout ages, and has been responsible for large-scale killing of men, for destroying great pieces of religious art-monuments, sculpture and painting, and precious libraries. One way of dealing with this problem was to put curbs on the followers who disturbed religious harmony, and punish the defaulters. Not unoften the kings themselves blindly favoured the sect they were followers of and even persecuted people who were followers of rival sects. Aśoka had a different way of dealing with the problem. Though himself a Buddhist, he honoured all sects and advised people to do the same. He told them that he desires that there should be concord amongst all religions and also that there should be growth of essentials of all religions. He advised people to keep restraint of speech when they talk about other religions, to broaden their outlook and become well informed by listening to the teachings of different religions (*bahuśruta*). Ethical teachings like mercy, liberality, truth, and purity of heart are common to all religions, and following them would make a man a better man and a better citizen. Thus acting in accordance with the scheme prescribed by Aśoka, presence of multiple sects would no more remain a source of danger to religious peace and a liability for the society and the State, and people of different sects would thrive and live together amicably and in harmony with each other.

References

1. D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions*, 2nd edn, Calcutta, 1965, pp. 32ff.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 62ff.
4. There is no doubt that Aśoka considers these two as very important virtues. However, he is in the habit of comparing one good quality with others and showing their relative importance. Generally the noble quality eulogised in a particular edict, has been referred to as more important virtue than others. This reminds us of the Ṛgvedic practice of praising a deity as supreme in the hymn composed in his praise. In rock Edict VII, Aśoka places self-restraint and purity of heart as more important eulogised as most important virtue..
5. D.C. Sircar, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.
6. D.C. sircar, *op.cit.*, pp. 15-16.
7. for discussion on this point, see also D. R. Bhandarkar, *Aśoka*, 3rd edn., calcutta, 1955, pp. 99-100.
8. D.R. Bhandarkar, *ibid.*, p. 100.
9. Pillar Edict II, vide D.C. Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 44-45.
10. See D.R. Bhandarkar, *op.cit.*, p. 79.
11. D.C. Sircar, *op.cit.*, pp. 74-75.
12. D.C. Sircar, *op.cit.*, pp. 75-76.
13. For a discussion of influences of different religions and cultures on Aśoka, see romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mayuryas*, revised edition, Delhi, 1997, pp. 138 ff.
14. D.C. Sircar, *op.cit.*, pp. 62 ff.
15. This reminds us of modern (beginning in about the middle of the last century) Indian government's policy of assigning the work of family welfare to different government officials who were to perform additional duty along with their normal duties.
16. *Jātaka*, III, no. 379, *Neru Jātaka*.
17. First they became followers of Buddhism, then of one who believed in the permanence of matter, then of one who denies the immortality, and lastly the sect of naked ascetics. *Ibid.*
18. D.C. Sircar, *op.cit.*, p. 26. Dr. Bhandarkar translates it as 'voluntary advances (to a sect)', *op.cit.*, p. 313. hultsch translated it as 'visiting (the people) personally' (*Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, I, *Inscriptions of Aśoka*, reprint, Delhi, 1991, p. 130.

