

Reappraisal of the Rock Edict I of Aśoka

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Aśoka had much faith in the sanctity of animal life and a great concern for the welfare of men and animals. Non-slaughter of animals (Rock Edicts III, IX, X and Pillar Edict VII) and non-injury to living beings (*avihisā bhūtānaṃ*, Rock Edict IV and Pillar Edict VII), formed part of the *dhamma*, which he disseminated among people. Besides Rock Edict I, Rock Edict II and Pillar Edict V also deal with Aśoka's kind treatment towards animals. Before discussing the evidence of Rock Edict I, we would cite the evidence of the other two. According to Pillar Edict V, he enacted regulations for the complete ban on the slaughter of certain species of animals and partial ban limited to certain auspicious days on the slaughter of others. She-goats, ewes, and sows with young ones or in milk and also their young ones up to six months of age were declared unworthy of slaughter. He minimized the slaughter of animals; as a complete ban was not practicable. Caponing of cocks, castration of bulls, rams and boars and branding of horses on certain auspicious days was also banned.

In Rock Edict II, Aśoka speaks of making provisions for medical treatment of animals, along with that for men not only within his own kingdom, but also in the territories ruled by other kings. The digging of wells and planting of trees along roads were done for the benefit of both men and animals. At one place, he states that his exertions were aimed at freeing himself from the debt he owed to the creatures (*bhūtānaṃ, ānaṃṇaṃ gacheyāṃ*, Rock Edict VI) for 'there is no higher duty than the welfare of the whole world' (*nāsti hi kaṃmataraṃ sarvaloka hitatpā*, Rock Edict VI).

We would now discuss the evidence of Rock Edict I. It prohibits people celebrating and participating in *samājas*, i.e. festive gatherings, in which animal fights and bird fights were arranged and meat and liquor were doled out freely to the people.

Because of his respect for all religions, he was not in favour of putting any restrictions on their religious practices. Yet, his deep concern for the sanctity of animals life made him issue an edict (i.e. Rock Edict I), prohibiting the killing of animals for purpose of sacrifice,

which was a feature of Brahmanical religion.¹ This would not have been to the liking of the followers of the vedic rituals, particularly the *brāhmaṇa* priests, who earned their livelihood by performing rituals. It may, however, be stated, and has been stated by earlier scholars, that in the time of Aśoka, even among the followers of the vedic tradition, there were some people who did not consider sacrificing animals as an essential part of the vedic ritual. The *Upaniṣads*, though belonging to the vedic tradition, yet do not favour animal sacrifice.²

K.A.N. Sastri is of the view that this law of Aśoka would have affected more mass of population engaged in primitive type of worship involving sacrifices, than the followers of vedic religion,³ and in banning the killing of animals for sacrifices there was no other intention of Aśoka except to minimize the destruction of animals life. Romila Thapar suggests that the association of animal sacrifice with primitive religion would have been one of the reasons for Aśoka's banning it.⁴

Aśoka took another major step to protect animal life. In Rock Edict I, it is said that earlier, in the royal kitchen, a large number of animals were slaughtered for meat curry. This was the practice of several kings of the past. For example, as pointed out by D.R.Bhandarkar,⁵ according to the *Mahābhārata*, in King Rantideva's kitchen, two thousand cattle and two thousand kine were slaughtered for doling out meat to public to earn their good wishes and support. As per Aśoka's instructions, this was stopped and only two peacocks (the original has *mora*, which means both a 'peacock' and a 'bird') daily, and one deer (the original has *mago*, which means both a 'deer' and an 'animal') occasionally, were killed, and in the same edict he assures that they, too, would not be killed in future.⁶ According to Bhandarkar,⁷ he did not at once completely stop the slaughter of animals, as he was very fond of meat, more particularly meat of pea-fowl. Buddhaghōṣa, in his commentary on the *Saṃyuttanikāya*, as D.R.Bhandarkar points out, states that the people of the Middle Country were fond of meat of pea-fowl,⁸ and the fact that two pea-fowls were continued to be killed (alongwith one deer) would have been weighed with D.R.Bhandarkar in expressing the view that two peacocks and one deer continued to be slaughtered for meat because Aśoka could not give up meat-eating so easily.

Why did Aśoka not at one stretch put complete ban on meat preparation in the royal kitchen? One can only guess.

B.M.Barua offers an explanation, which is not convincing. According to him, "One deer and two pea-fowls continued to be daily killed in the kitchen presumably for meat offering to the family deity or idol (*rājadevatā*)."⁹ This suggestion of Barua does not go well with the nature and ideals of Aśoka as gleaned from his inscriptions. Aśoka certainly had great regard for ancient traditions (*porāṇa-pakiti*, Minor Rock Edict II) and he considers that

features of his *dhamma* were part of that tradition, which, he says, is long lasting (*dīghāuse*).¹⁰ But he discarded such practices, which he deemed as not good for society and introduced new ones for the material and moral welfare of the people. After turning Buddhist, which event took place in the ninth year of his reign, he would have given up meat-eating. The date of Rock Edict I, as the date of all Rock Edicts, is taken by most of the scholars as the fourteenth regnal year, to which view we also subscribe. It is difficult to believe that Aśoka, who is known for his equal treatment to the followers of all religions, would have, on the one hand, banned the killing of animals for sacrifice, and, on the other hand, himself continued to kill two peacocks and one deer to offer meat to the *rājadevatā*. He clearly states that two peacocks and one deer will also not be slaughtered afterwards. If he were to stop the offering of meat to the *rājadevatā*, he would have done that at one stroke and not in stages. Further, for offering meat to the god, killing of one bird or an animal would have sufficed, rather than two birds and one deer. Even if two pea-fowls and one deer is taken as the ideal offering, then it is difficult to explain as to why the deer was not killed daily.¹¹ Thus the view of Barua is not convincing.

We feel that Aśoka was sincere in his intentions and firm in his resolve regarding the total ban on the slaughter of animals in the royal kitchen, and he would have set his personal example before others by completely giving up eating meat. It would have taken some time for him to persuade some members of the royal family, who were fond of meat, to give up meat eating, and turn fully vegetarian. Besides, occasionally, foreign dignitaries would have been invited for meals at the royal palace, and it would have taken some time to make them acquainted with the wishes of the king that within a short period the preparation of meat dishes at the royal kitchen would be completely stopped. It is because of this that he did not abruptly put a blanket ban on the killing of animals in the royal kitchen.

The Greek version of the same edict says that 'the king abstains from the slaughter of living beings'.¹² Aśoka elsewhere (Pillar Edict VI) tells us that he undertakes acts of welfare of the people, as he feels that people would follow his example. It is unthinkable that he would have stopped the large scale slaughter of animals for meat curry to be offered to the people, and himself continued eating meat, which would have sent wrong signals to people and make him appear low in their esteem.

Footnotes

1. The word *idha* has been used in this context, which can and has been variously been taken as royal establishment or Pāṭaliputra or kingdom, and probably the last meaning is meant.
2. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VII. 1; *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* III. 5.1, vide R.K.Mookerji, *Aśoka* (4th edition), p. 66, n. 1.
3. K.A.N. Sastri (ed), *Age of the Nandas and the Mauryas* (reprint, Delhi, 1996), p. 238.

4. Romila Thapar, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (revised edition, Delhi, 1997), p. 151.
5. D.R.Bhandarkar, *Aśoka* (3rd edition, Calcutta 1955), p. 19.
6. In the Greek version of Khandahar bilingual and biscriptual inscription, it is stated that by the end of the tenth year of his reign the king's huntsmen ceased from hunting and fishermen from catching fish (D.C.Sircar, *Aśokan Studies*, reprint, Calcutta, 2000, p. 45). This has been taken by some scholars as referring to the hunters and fishermen in the king's private estate, who supplied the animals and fish to the royal kitchen for the preparation of curries, as it would not have been feasible to apply such rules in the context of the whole empire.
7. D.R.Bhandarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.
8. *Ibid.*
9. B.M.Barua, *Aśoka and His Inscriptions* (Calcutta, 1946), p. 171.
10. *Dīghāuse* could also be taken to mean as 'conductive to long life'.
11. *Cf so pi mago, na dhuvo* (Rock Edict I).
12. Translation by D.C.Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 45.