

Report II

Aśoka - the Man and the King

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The source material related to Project was studied in greater detail. The relative merits of the literary and the epigraphic evidences were discussed and their uniformity and the differences were highlighted. The literary evidence particularly met within the *Dīpavaṁśa* and the *Mahāvamśa*, portray Aśoka before converting to Buddhism, as extremely cruel (*Caṇḍāśoka*), and as a pious soul (*Dharmāśoka*) after the conversion.

The story of Aśoka's killing his 99 brothers for throne, mentioned in the texts, is a palpable lie, as the epigraphs show that his brothers were living while he was ruling. When there is a conflict between the literary and the epigraphic evidences, the latter being more authentic, has been preferred. The mention of the five Greek kings contemporary to Aśoka, in the Rock Edict XIII, provides an unmistakable evidence for fixing the date of the accession of Aśoka.

The epigraphs written in a very simple and straightforward language bear personal touch and appear as if they record Aśoka's own words. To make the things more easily understandable, often first a question is raised and then an answer is given. For example, the epigraphs raise the question, what is *Dharma* and then its definition according to Aśoka is given. From the study of the form of the language used in different versions of the edicts, it has been rightly guessed that the original drafts of the inscriptions were prepared at Pataliputra, the capital of Aśoka, in Māgadhī - the form of Prakrit that was in use in and around it, and were then modified in accordance with the Prakrit of the region in which they were to be recorded. It is because of this that there are differences in the texts of the inscriptions recorded in different regions. Relative chronology of the edicts has been discussed mainly on the basis of the regnal years mentioned in some of them and the evidence of the contents has also been taken into consideration for this purpose. The aims that Aśoka had in mind and the methods used by him, have been analyzed and it has also been discussed as to how far he was successful in achieving the goals. Aśoka refers to himself as *Devānāmpriya Priyadarśī*. The name Aśoka is mentioned only in a few epigraphs, all of them being Minor Rock

Inscriptions and most of them recorded in places near his southern boundary, and never at places of his Fourteen Rock Edicts or Seven Pillar Edicts. The connotation of *Devānāmpriya* and *Priyadarśī* has been discussed in some detail. It has been stated that unlike kings of Gupta and many other dynasties, the epigraphs of Aśoka do not give genealogy. Even the names of his grandfather, the mighty king Candragupta Maurya and his father Bindusāra do not find place in them.

The fact that Aśoka's personal religion was Buddhism is evident from his statements that he had great regard for the Buddha, the Dharma and the *Samgha*, (Bhabru Edict), that he became a lay devotee of the Buddha (Minor Rock Edict), that he went on pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, the place where Buddha obtained Enlightenment, and Lumbini, the birth place of the Buddha, etc. Literary evidence too clearly states about his conversion to Buddhism. There is controversy whether Aśoka became a convert to Buddhism before or after the war of Kaliṅga. While literary evidence would place the conversion a few years before the war, the epigraphic evidence would favour the view that it was the great tragedy of the Kaliṅga war in which a large number of people were killed, or wounded, or deported that made Aśoka convert to Buddhism. The *Dhamma* that Aśoka wanted his subjects to follow contains such moral and ethical principles as are met with in all higher religions. Aware of the fact that the word *Dhamma* used by him is likely to be mistaken for tenets of a particular sect, he made it a point to explain that he means by it *dayā* (kindness), *dāna* (charity), *satya* (truth), *śauca* (purity). It also means freedom from such bad elements as *caṇḍatā* (violence), *niṣṭhuratā* (cruelty), *krodha* (anger), *māna* (vanity), *īrṣyā* (envy) etc. In short, it is stated that less of sin and more of good is *Dhamma*. He neither mentions the Four Noble Truths (*catvā-ri-ārya-satyāni*), nor Eight-fold path (*aṣṭāṅgika-mārga*), nor *Nirvāṇa*. This has made some scholars speculate regarding the source of the *Dhamma* that Aśoka wanted his subjects to follow, and a few denied it was Buddhism. Some considered it merely a code of conduct based on the principles of different religions. But Bhandarkar has shown, citing evidence from several Buddhist texts, that the *Dhamma* of Aśoka was based on Buddhism as meant to be followed by the lay worshippers, although the principles can also be found in Hinduism and other religions. Aśoka utilized the services of his officials in disseminating *Dhamma* among his subjects. The officers were to do this work along with their official duties. For spreading the message of his *Dhamma* in the neighbouring countries, he dispatched emissaries.

It is curious that Aśoka prescribed certain Buddhist texts for monks to study, and that he warned the monks and nuns not to create schism in the *samgha*, or else they would be expelled from it. The prescribing of the texts to the monks would be the job of the head of the *samgha*, and it would be the elders of the *samgha* who would have the authority to expel the erring monks. It is not known if the *samgha* had authorized Aśoka for such acts, or he himself, in the interest of the religion took the authority in his hands.

Aśoka showed respect to all the religious sects, and their followers. He was very keen that there should be religious concord and harmony. He exhorted people to listen to the tenets of other religions, and not unnecessarily criticize the teachings of others' religion. By respecting others' religion, he says one respects one's own religion, and by insulting others' religion, one harms his own religion.

Aśoka did many things for the material welfare of men and animals, such as planting trees on the road side, digging wells along the roads at regular intervals, and making provisions of watersheds. He provided facilities for medical treatment both for men and animals, not only in his own kingdom but also in his neighbouring kingdoms, and made arrangements for the import of medicinal herbs and also for their cultivation. He ordered that certain species of animals were not to be slaughtered or tortured on all days, and some on auspicious days. He ordered that animals were not to be killed for sacrifice, and virtually stopped killing of animals and birds for meat to be served in the royal kitchen.

He pleaded against performing useless rituals, connected with marriage, birth of son, while making journey, etc. He condemned such gathering in which bird fight, animal fight etc. were arranged or meat on a large scale was doled out.

Aśoka's empire was the largest in ancient Indian history. It comprised the area his grandfather Candragupta got after overthrowing the last Nanda king, the four satrapies adjoining north-western frontier that the same ruler received from Seleucus as per terms of the treaty, and the region of Kaliṅga conquered by Aśoka himself. The find spots of his inscriptions, as also the mention of border states in Aśoka's epigraphs help in determining the extent of his empire.

At the centre of the administration was the emperor who was benevolent and who declared that all subjects were like his children and it was his duty to look after

their welfare. There was a central Assembly to help and advise him. The empire was divided into administrative units like province, district, *tehsil* and village. Some officials like *rājukas*, *prādeśikas*, *puruṣas*, etc. have been mentioned in Aśokan epigraphs. An attempt has been made to understand their relative position in the hierarchy of officials, as also their rights and duties. A very important office was that of the *dharmamahāmātras* who were to look after the moral welfare of people and to induce people, particularly members of the royal household to offer money and material in charity. Aśoka increased the power of high officials in granting reward and punishment.

Aśoka's relations with the neighbouring kingdoms were cordial. He assured them not to fear him, as he would not attack their territories. He, in fact, contributed towards the moral and material welfare of the people there, by making provision for the medical treatment for men and animals and preaching *Dhamma* to the people. It is creditable that in the age when modern means of transport and communication were not available, Aśoka kept himself posted with informations regarding kingdoms and kings near and far from his own kingdom, and sent his emissaries to preach *Dhamma*, and exchanged embassies with them.

