

Influence of Buddhism on Ashoka

Pradeep Kumar*

“Amidst tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, the name of Asoka shines alone a star”

-H.G. Wells “The Outlines of History”¹

This statement clearly exemplifies that Ashoka in the World Historical Perspective was not only the third monarch of the Mauryan dynasty in the third century B.C. who unified India for the first time but one of the greatest political figure who made an deliberate attempt to imbibe politics with spiritualism to sustain the manifestations of power, domination with moral illuminations and inward self-enlightenment. This conjoint effort was clearly seen in numerous edicts and inscriptions which shows Ashoka in close association with Buddhism. The Buddhist texts and traditions project him as an illustrious political figure and an devout upasaka. He holds a very special place in Buddhist Sangha and marks the emergence of “the beginnings of political theory”²

It’s this political theory which embarks the pacifistic – moral orientations and implications of the policies of Ashoka to let the development of “Patriarchal ethical and charitable ideal of a welfare states”³. This was sustained in numerous edicts and inscriptions.

Ashoka has been identified in the World history as one of the greatest ruler who not only gave breathing space to the relics of Buddhism but unconditionally raised the establishment of various Buddhist sites in many parts of the subcontinent. This builds up the statement that Ashoka build up these sites to set a mark as an devout upasaka. We get various proclaims of his faith in Buddhism in numerous edicts and inscriptions. Like in minor Rock Edict 1 he speaks “A little over two and a half years he passed since I have avowedly become a Sakya [a lay follower of the Buddha]. It’s now more than a year since the Sangha has been intimately associated with me and I have been exerting myself in the cause of the Dharma.”⁴

Ashoka as a Mauryan Emperor has to his credits the vividness of religions as a part of his genealogical cycle, where Chandragupta has been associated with Jainism, and his father Bindusara as the follower of Ajivikas. This shows that Mauryas as a family did not conform the accepted religions of most royal families of that period, Brahmanism and parallel favoured non-orthodox sects to suit up the century of questioning. This also shows that in order to build up his name, he issued series of edicts and proclamations inscribed on rock surfaces and finally on polished sandstone Pillars. Most of these inscriptions were inscribed in Brahmi, to write the earliest Indian script in Sanskrit and Prakrit⁵ which over the years became archaic and unreadable. Thus losing its hold over the writing of history. It was only in 1837, these inscriptions were deciphered for the first time by James Prinsep who made an remarkable attempt to elaborately study inscriptions.

It was overwhelming to observe that Ashoka had a close proximity to Buddhism and inscriptions decipher this truth. In the inscriptions, Ashoka was called as DevanampiyaPiyadassi raja, the beloved of the Gods. Ashoka in seldom note used his personal name whereas in general he referred himself by the above little on comparative basis with the Buddhist chronicles of Ceylon.⁶This was done with a deliberate attempt to sanctify his name and portion among the masses. The edicts of his time justifies him as a Buddhist and Buddhist sources from Ceylon, Tibet and China contains detailed accounts of the life of Ashoka.

In view of above said, one can clearly observe that Ashoka in his studies has been referred as a ruler who converted to Buddhism because of the remorse he felt when he inflicted cruelty on the people of Kalinga in his Ninth reign year. Thus opens discussions for conforming Ashoka as a follower of Buddhist ethics. It was in this pretext, we come across Vincet A. Smith who has been considered as the first historian to have written a monograph on Ashoka and in that refers Ashoka as a Monk and Monarch at the same time⁸. This view of V.A. Smith has been agreed by D.R. Bhandarkar⁹ who agrees that Ashoka was a Buddhist and his policy of Dhamma was the relics of Buddhism. This view was also agreed upon by R.K. Mokerji¹⁰ who too believed that the personal religion of Ashoka was Buddhism only. This view has been reiterated with the view of Fritz Kern who also showed the inner struggle

of Ashoka where he utterly tries to attain freedom from the earthly ties but still finds himself captivated in the responsibilities of ruler to serve society¹¹. Though these approaches have been questioned over now and then by historians yet motivates to know further about Ashoka.

It was well established fact that Ashoka was attracted/motivated to Buddhism but this motivation and conversion to Buddhism was very much sudden as quoted in his edicts. His acceptance to Buddhism was result of widespread movements which affected various facets of his life i.e. from his personal beliefs to social beliefs and from manual to defined.

We get information of Ashoka's proximity to Buddhism from two kinds of Inscriptions. The smaller group of inscriptions contains declarations of the King as a lay Buddhist his association with Buddhist Sangha¹² and his inner will of accepting Buddhism whereas the larger group of inscriptions contains proclamations to the public/masses for general reference and acceptability. Thus, together they comprise Major and Minor Rock Edicts and the Pillar Edicts¹³. These inscriptions clearly showcased his well known policy of Dhamma which has been broadly referred as the bunch of morality, piety, Righteousness and so on. Dhamma has been considered not only as piety result of good deeds but as a part of social responsibilities. Though in past, AshokaDhamma policy has been referred as an synonymous of Buddhism which fosters the notion that Ashoka was very much inclined to make Buddhism a state religion. This notion has been accepted widely. There were numerous inscriptions which strengthens the fact that Ashoka not only endorsed Buddhism but at the same time gave patronage to it also. They consist major and minor Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts. These lithic records have asserted that Ashoka began his journey as a lay follower of Buddhism and after sometime developed a close association with monks and Sangha. His inscriptions clearly project his well known policy of Dhamma which has special reference to piety, moral life, righteousness and so on. These features of his policy of Dhamma were the melting pot for several moral policies of various religions and the aim of them was to develop moral and social consciousness among the masses. AshokaDhamma policy shared a close proximity to Buddhism and has been perceived a path for attainment of personal salvation and a policy of sustaining social responsibilities in the society. The aim of his policy was to build up conductive environment for mind to encompass social

behaviors with others. The policy was a plight for recognizing dignity and raising humanistic spirits in the society. The main tenets of policy of Dhamma were laid on non-violence and Toleration. As stated by K. A. N. Sastri "The promotion of toleration and harmony among different religious and kindness towards animal life were the two important aspects of the Dhamma".¹⁴

We get numerous instances from his 3rd, 4th, 11th Rock edicts and 7th pillar edicts where he specially talks about promoting kindness towards animal lives. In his Rock edicts he gives very specific commands not to slaughter living creatures for serving sacrifices. In these Rock edicts he further talks about that "how Hundreds-Thousands of living beings have been slaughtered everyday in the kitchen for curry; though only three living creatures were killed daily for curry and they were two birds and one animal. This practice was questioned elaboratively and stoppage to it was necessitated to serve in future".¹⁵ Ashoka reiterated the notion that only by adopting conquest by the Dhamma one can foster the belief of non-violence. The other important tenets of his Dhamma policy were toleration which was very much visible from his actions and behaviour with other religious. It was in this pretext, he extended his Royal Patronage to all sects whether it was a grant to Ajivikas or Buddhist and so on. We get illuminations of this principle from 7th Rock Edict and 12th Rock Edicts. This illumination has been rightly stated by Romila Thapar as well. She states it as the principle of toleration was not about passive co-existence but as a frame of active mind which opens gates for further discussions but puts a figure on any kind of offence."¹⁶

Ashoka's Dhamma policies had deep impact on it from the ritualistic side of Buddhism which has close association with the images of popular cults such as Tree-Worship and fertility cults¹⁷ to develop close association in daily lives. This shows that principle of Dhamma were acceptable to all and welcoming for all sections of the society.¹⁸ Ashoka's Dhamma policy was not only a religious policy but a policy of moral and social code of conduct. This policy comprised a code of duties, charter of civic virtues and social morality.¹⁹

This has been stated in different Pillar Edicts and Rock Edicts. These virtues were Daya or Kindness, Satyam or Truthfulness, Shauchama or inner and outer purity, Mardavam or gentleness, Sadhuta or Saintness, Apa-Vyayata or moderation in spending and saving,

Samyama or self-control, Bhava-Shuddhi or Purity, Kritanjanata or gratitude, Dridhabhaktita or firm devotion and Dharmarati or attachment to morality. These virtues were important features of Dhamma policy as stated by R.C. Majumdar²⁰. The Dhamma Policy was nothing but just policy of benevolence to serve social welfare.

These virtues make the assumption even more strong that Ashoka's Dhamma policy were set of moral or virtuous life and was common for all religions. These Dhammapolicy were serving Universal acceptability by all religions because it suited needs and requirements of all ages and had political imperatives to its course.

Though group of some historians have held Ashoka's Dhamma policy responsible for the disintegration of Mauryan Empire. Historians like Rhys Davis quotes "with all evidences it appears that Ashoka looked after all yet he left his empire in such a disintegrated and crumbled condition."²¹ The other reasons that have put Ashoka's Dhamma policy in bad light were that his policy imbibed military pacifism which made him appear as a weak ruler. Along with it there was a Brahmanical reaction attached to it because of his Pro-Buddhist attitude. These opinions have been refuted by H.C. Raychaudhary, K.A.N. Sastri, R.K. Mookerjee and Romila Thapar²². They all were of the opinion that Ashoka never ill-treated the Brahmens and his military pacifist policy was to establish social welfarist state.

Thus one can say in epilogue that Asoka had an deep impact of Buddhism on his life and policies which in turn made him appear as a pro-welfare state ruler who had deep humanitarian approach.

References

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2. Max Weber, The Religion of India, pp-237-238
3. Max Weber, The Religion of India, P. 238
4. E. Hultzsch, Corpus Inscription Indicarum, vol-I, Inscriptions of Ashoka, Indological Book House, Delhi, 1969, PP 67-69
5. A few inscriptions in the North-West of India were inscribed in Kharoshthi. In 1958 a bilingual inscription in Greek & Armaic were discovered near Kandahar in Afganistan.
6. Oldenberg, Dipavamsa, Pali Text society, 1879.
7. Jules Bloch, Les. Inscriptions d' Asoka, Paris, 1950, pp-145-45.
8. V. Smith, Asoka, Oxford, 1920.

9. D.R. Bhandarkar, Ashoka, Calcutta, 1925, p.72
10. R.K. Mookerji, Ashoka, MotilalBanarsidass, 1962, p.60
11. Fritz Kern, Ashoka, Bern, 1956.
12. The literal meaning of Sangha was "Society" or "Assembly". It was the official title adopted for the Buddhist order of monks.
13. The first group consists of the Schism Edict, Bhabra Edict, Rummindei Pillar inscription and Nigalisesgar Pillar inscription, Jules Bloch, Op.cit, pp.152-158. The larger group consist of the major and minor Edicts and Pillar Edicts, Jules Bloch, Op.cit, pp-90-151 & pp.161-172.
14. K.A.N. Sastri, Age of the Nandas and Mauryas, MotilalBanarsidass, Delhi, 1951, p.237.
15. D.C. Sriar, Inscriptions of Ashoka, Publications Divisions, Delhi, 2009, p.34
16. Romila Thapar, Ashoka and The Decline of the Mauryas, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2008, p.162.
17. This was clear from the incorporation of cult symbols in the earliest existing Buddhist art at the sites sacred to the religion such as Sanchi and Bharhut.
18. Evidences for these attitudes were available in the Jataka Stores.
19. These virtues do have mention in the Buddhist relies and teachings.
20. R.C. Majumdar, Ancient India, MotilalBanarsiadass, Delhi, 1977, P.112.
21. Rhys. Davids, Buddhist India, Indological Book House, Delhi, 1970, P.138.
22. These set of historians firmly believed that there were other reasons also which led to the downfall of Ashoka and his empire apart from Brahmanical reaction and his Pacifist policy.

