



Emperor Ashoka – Ancient Indian Political Thought

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ABSTARCT

The edicts of the Maurya Emperor Ashoka (C. 268 – 232 BCE) constitute the first self representations of imperial power in ancient South Asia. Questioning the usual pre-positions and methodology of historical interpretations of Ashoka's inscriptions, this article attempts a fresh detailed analysis of the political philosophy expressed in the edicts, with a special focus on their ideas and arguments regarding the relationships between political power, violence, happiness and the good. The ideas of a political and moral empire, the inclusion of humans and animals in the King's constituency, the political importance attached to emotions, the connection between the governance of the state and the self, the rationals of the mitigation of the conflict and violence in the social and political spheres all have to be understood as inter connected parts of a larger whole, firmly anchored in culturally rooted idea of Karma, merit and the attainment of heaven. While constituting an exceptionally rich epigraphic source for political ideas, the edicts also vividly, reveal how these ideas intersected with the problems and practice of governing a vast, very variegated empire. The methodological emphasis of the paper is that inscriptions texts and that excavating the world of ideas embodied in them is an important part of the analysis of these material remains of the past.

Keywords – Ashoka, empire, Goodness, Edicts, Political Importance.

Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty is today perceived as one of the greatest rulers of our history. But over the millemia he was perceived in various ways and a retrospective of his influence is almost a tour through the entire span of Indian history. Why was this extra-ordinary ruler surmingly ignored by some, why he has become so prominent in recent times? How has his influence permeated through different historical period and how have his legacy and idea has appropriate by whom and in what form?

Many modern assessments have tended to view him largely only as a Buddhist. When placed in a historical context in more recent times the man and his ideas come to be liberated from this single perspective. We need to see him both as a statesman in the context of inheriting and sustaining an empire in a particular historical period and as a person with a strong commitment to changing society through what might be called the propagation of social ethics.

Empires of the ancient world or often thought to have operated through the violence of conquest and the persuasion of ideology, the later often intended to bring about a relative cultural uniformity. The method of conquest and the resistance to it varied, requiring subsequent adjustments in systems of governing and in cultural expression. Ancient empires incorporated contiguous territories which allowed to some broad based similarities within their boundaries. Nevertheless disparities persisted, this was unlike colonial empires conquered across the oceans. These required new cultural articulations but did not necessarily aim at cultural uniformity.

The Ashokan edicts might be the best way of initiating a reassessment of the king and the nature of his policies. Most of the edicts are personal statements of how he was himself as combining political sovereignty and governance with closeness to what have been regarded as heterodox views. They were heterodox but the larger number of his subjects would not have found them alien. His reading of political sovereignty, both the conquest of Jambudvipa and the welfare of his praja (subjects), I did not contradicts his perspective on required policies. The edicts, moving between the two, often take shape as a discourse on governance and ethics.

Ashokan edicts seem more sensitive to a flexible administration. This is demonstrated in his orders to his officers and in the functions of the Dhamma-mahamatyas, especially appointed officers more particularly concerned with the well-being of his subjects. Adjustments to local conditions in the patterns of government were likely and I have suggested that administration was diversified. Whereas there was a relatively centralized administration in the Ganga plain with its epicentre in Magadha at the time, this was somewhat different from the less centralised administration in other areas.

And so we come to the rediscovery of Ashoka in our times. It began with the decipherment of the brahmi script in the 19th century using the

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Ashokan inscriptions as texts. The clues from the Sri Lankan chronicles were conferred by the reading of some of his inscriptions discovered some decades later. The debates began on the historian assessment of Ashoka Maurya at the start of the 20th Century. And inevitably the modern context impinged on the past and the past in turn gave shape to aspects of the present.

In order to gain wide publicity for his teachings and his work, Ashoka made them known by means of oral announcements and by engravings on rocks and pillars at suitable sites. These inscriptions the rock edicts and pillar edicts (e.g., the lion capital of the pillar found at Sarnath which has become India's national emblem), mostly dated in various years of his reign-contain statements regarding his thoughts and actions and provided information on his life and acts. His utterances rang of frankness and sincerity.

To practice his philosophy actively, Ashoka went out on periodic tours preaching to the rural people and relieving their sufferings. He ordered his high officials to do the same, in addition to attending to their normal duties, he exhorted administrative officers to be constantly aware of the joys and sorrows of the common folk and to be prompt and impartial in dispensing justice. A special class of high officers 'Dhamma mahamatyas' was appointed to foster his philosophy relieve suffering wherever found and look to the special needs of women, of people inhabiting outlying regions, of neighbouring peoples, and of various religious communities. It was ordered that matters concerning public welfare were to be reported to him at all time. Now doubts are left in the minds of readers of his inscriptions regarding his earnest zeal for serving his subjects. The Sinhalese chronicles Mahavamsa says that when the order decided to send preaching philosophy abroad, Ashoka helped them enthusiastically and sent his own son and daughter as missionaries to Sri Lanka.

An intensified interest in ancient Indian political life and institutions has brought chosen to contemporary reader's what one author has termed 'The Wonder that was India'. The present article proposes a summary of Indian Political thoughts as seen through the perspective of the reign of Ashoka, the emperor of the Third Century B.C. A study of the Ashokan era recalls a great historical figure, "from the volga to Japan his name is still honoured... More living men cherish his memory today, than have ever heard the names of Constantine or Charlemagne." A study of Ancient Indian polity suggests interesting comparisons with modern political conceptions, such as natural law, political obligation, and contract, which can here be undertaken only incidentally.

There are certain difficulties with which a review of Ashoka's place in Ancient Indian political thought must contend. Ashoka himself was principally as administrator rather than a theorist quo theorist. Exact relationships and points of impact between Ashoka and earlier speculation are often obscure. Authorities differ as to the facts within and the meanings behind the emperor's reign. With these limitation in mind, an attempt is made to capsule the theoretical background of Ashoka's reign, to discuss Emperors political philosophical thoughts.

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