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## Asokan inscriptions: A bird-eye view

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### Abstract

Asoka is one of the greatest emperors not only in Indian history but in world history. He was a great conqueror, efficient administrator and successful religious leader. No matter from which point of view his achievements are evaluated, he proves to be absolutely worthy. 'He had the energy of a Chandra Gupta, the versatility of a Samudra Gupta and the catholicity of an Akbar.' He was an appropriate successor for the vast empire that he inherited from his father. As a conqueror, we have seen how he assimilated the kingdom of Kalinga. Asoka personally participated in this war and conducted the army. This shows his military prowess. During his reign, India had experienced unprecedented political unity and stability. He made many reforms in the field of administration. He was a '*Prajapalak*' emperor and his concept of kingship was patriarchal reform. He never claimed his divine origin and always considered himself a servant of the people. He was sincerely eager to do not only material but also the moral welfare of his subjects. In his vast empire, he organised and conducted the administration with such great ability and skill that there was complete peace and order in his long reign of about 37 years. He solved the problem of national unity very efficiently and introduced the practice of using one language, one script and one type of law in the whole country. The establishment of punishment-equality and behavioural equality certainly heralds the revolutionary era in the field of administration of justice. In his sixth inscription, he expresses his views on kingship in these words: "The welfare of all is my duty. There is no other act greater than preserving the interest of all. Whatever valour I do, it is so that I may be free from the debt of the past."

**Keywords:** Asokan inscriptions, bird-eye

### Introduction

In world history, there have been many kings, warriors and skilled administrators like Asoka. But Asoka is most famous for his public welfare works and in history it is difficult to find the second ruler of his match in this area. He was the first ruler in whose liberal view not only the entire human society, but all living beings were equal. He considered all the spirits of his ancestors to be his benefactors. At the time when he conquered Kalinga, he had immense resources and power and if he wanted, he could use it in conquering the world. But his tender heart was moved for the welfare of mankind, and even after reaching the zenith of power, he completely turned his back on the missions of conquests. This is a surprising event in itself which does not keep coincidence in world history. He began preaching Buddhism and used all the resources of his vast empire in its propagation. As a result of this preaching work, Buddhism, which had spread only around Magadha in the third century BC, not only spread throughout India and Sri Lanka, but also spread to West Asia, Eastern Europe and North Africa. Thus Asoka, with his indomitable zeal, made a local religion a universal religion. But his indomitable enthusiasm towards this religion did not make him cruel or intolerant towards other religions. He never tried to force his religion on anyone. Such personalities are rarely found in the pages of history. Asoka spread his message of universal brotherhood and public welfare to the countries far and wide. He was a preacher of peace and tolerance in international affairs. Asoka was the first to teach the world the lesson of 'Live and Let Others Live' and Political Violence is against Dharma. Such a policy was not adopted before Asoka. He reversed 'The theory of triumph by means of weapons' as propounded by Kautilya. In the words of Radhakumud Mookerjee, 'Ashoka is the foremost among the discoverers of peace and universal brotherhood in history. In this respect he was far ahead not only of his time but also of modern times, which is still struggling to implement this ideal.'

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## Society and political development from Vedic to Asoka period

Origin of State has been discussed in detail in ancient texts. Many different theories have been propagated regarding the origin of state. Many scholars have analysed all the aspects described in the Brahman Texts. Many quotations can be found in Puranas about the works of state. The theory of the Divine origin of State is clearly mentioned in Brahman texts. If we read the ancient texts deeply, we can clearly see that the state developed from smaller political units. These smaller political units came together to form joint legislative union which after sometime developed into a proper state. The structure and work of these states were simple and it operated in general fashion. Kings command was supreme and he was believed to be the most powerful person in state. King was the Chief Jurist too. Though king could intervene in religious matters too but the suggestions made by the state priest were also respected. King was the Chief commander of forces and declared war on other states. But when the works of state started getting complex many other departments were formed and the power of King also got decentralized.

A very comprehensive analysis of the emergence of the state is found in the ancient texts. The theory around the origin of the state has been depicted in different ways in Brahmanical texts and Buddhist texts. However, there are many aspects where similar ideology related to the state is seen in both the texts. In the Brahmanical texts, the family is considered the minimum unit of the state and the head of the family, i.e., the 'Karta', is assigned a privileged role. It is also seen in the Brahmanical texts that the rights of women are specially described and they are viewed from a respectable point of view in the society. In contrast, Buddhist texts consider the king to be the paramount head of the state and he has a monopoly on all the important matters of the state such as revenue, security and law etc. Buddhist texts also mention that if the king is unable to perform his duties of the state, then he can be removed from office. It is clearly written in '*Digha Nikaya*' that the basis around the origin of the state is based on the '*divine principle*'. However, unlike western scholars, the king has been considered as the true representative of the subjects and not the representative of God. Hence, we find that in both the texts the origin of the state is based on the social and political structure of that time.

The political contract that flourished in the '*Digha Nikaya*' not only emphasizes on the qualifications to be determined as a king, but also clearly states the responsibilities of the parties. While in '*Aitareya Brahmana*' the emphasis is on qualities like power and energy, in '*Digha Nikaya*' the emphasis is on beauty, popularity, attractiveness and merit. The qualities of the heart and mind have been combined with the aesthetic physical qualities. The obvious reason for this is the tendency of Buddhists to oppose use of force and violence. Thus overall, the responsibility of the head of the state is to prevent crimes, he intervenes only when people violate prestigious laws, many titles were associated with the king which shows the fulfilment of his responsibility. The title 'Khattiya' is said to mean the owner of the fields, which suggests that the first duty of the king was to protect the people's fields from one another.

In ancient India, the king is generally described as the protector of Dharma. Buddhist sources also place before the king the ideals of Dharmadhwaja, Dharmaketu and

Dharmagnipati <sup>[1]</sup>. In Shanti Parva, religion is considered dependent on the king <sup>[2]</sup>. According to it, "When unrighteousness is not stopped, no one can no one can claim scriptural property rights of anything." When unrighteousness spreads in the world, man ceases to be the owner and consumer of his wife, cattle, field, barn and house <sup>[3]</sup>.

There are different opinions about the general conditions of people and how did the state come into being, in ancient times. Kautilya says that the power of the state helps us procure things, keep them safe with us, helps in enriching and multiplying it and to make proper use of the things we have. It is most important for the proper functioning of the worldly order. A powerful state is necessary if it wants to help the public lead a virtuous life. If power is used properly and in the interest of the people it will lead public having sumptuous dharma, arth and kaam.

If the power of the state is totally curbed it will lead to total collapse of order and as the big fish devour the little fish in the ocean so will the powerful ravage the weak. It is only because of the power of the state that all the four Varnas can fulfil and keep on doing their duties properly <sup>[4]</sup>.

According to Kautilya, state is a natural institution- an institution which was there, when the Hindu society with all its Varna and ashram system was first established, it was not something which came later, but was thought of as the natural institution for the survival of the society. The virtues, good behaviour, morality, modesty, duties and all other things are dependent upon the existence of a state itself. It is only because of the king that we can imagine of a Varna and Ashram system working efficiently because only because of the fear of law the people do their duties the right way and in good order. Communication itself is dependent upon the law and justice.

Asoka has tried to formulate moral rules in his kingdom while setting the highest ideal of Dharmatantra. Many historians compare Asoka with his contemporaries, earlier and later kings. Asoka was compared with David, Solomon etc. According to his highest ideal, Asoka has made an unprecedented effort to make a local religion a world religion.

One can compare the religious duties performed by Asoka with the services of Constantine to Christianity. Asoka's empire management and officials can be compared with Charlemagne's management system etc. The style of Asoka's inscription seems to be similar to the speeches of Oliver Cromwell; if one compares the social, cultural work of Akbar with that of Asoka, it appears to have very similar meanings. Asoka has preserved his autobiography by writing about the public welfare of the people in his inscriptions, in which Asoka's philosophy of life is reflected. With this philosophy of life, Ashoka has tried to make his dream of Rajdharma come true. Accordingly, Asoka has started preaching to the people according to the highest ideal. There are many sources to know the history of Asoka. If we consider the fables, then it is known that only information about the early life of Asoka is obtained from them, whether the legend is from Sri Lanka or related to India. The information about the period after Asoka became the emperor, is obtained mainly from the inscriptions

<sup>1</sup> Digha Nikaya, Page No 234

<sup>2</sup> Shantiparv, 90.5

<sup>3</sup> Shantiparv, 90, 9-10

<sup>4</sup> Kautilya, Arthashastra, (1/4)

engraved by Asoka. Fables are also unable to provide information about this period. If a comparative study is made of the fables and the inscriptions of Asoka, then the inscriptions appear to be important sources, as there is a difference of opinion amongst the legends, whereas the inscriptions are Asoka's personal version and provide accurate information. The literary source of Sri Lanka, Deepavansh, has been written about Asoka's family from the Mahavansh. According to Deepavansh, the name of Asoka's guru was Janasan, who was an 'Aajivak' monk. Asoka was also influenced by the 'Aajivak' sect, so his inscriptions discuss donations to the 'Aajivikas'. According to literary sources, Asoka was appointed the viceroy or governor of the province of Avantiratum in western India, while according to Sri Lankan literature his capital was Ujjain, but according to Indian beliefs, Ashoka was the viceroy in the kingdom of Uttarapatha, whose capital was Taxila.

In my view, it is wrong to give the title of '*Chandashoka*' to Asoka because of these cruelties. Because Asoka did not get all his brothers killed. We find evidence of this in rock articles 5 and 13. Evidence of the existence of Asoka's brothers is found in these rock inscriptions. It is possible that the number, which has been mentioned in the public opinion, may be an exaggeration that Asoka had all his brothers and relatives killed. Asoka's inscriptions show that there must have been a gap between the time of Asoka's accession to the throne and his consecration as in every inscription we find a special mention, by him, that '*I got the record written after so many years of my consecration*'. Perhaps he wanted to make it clear that there should be no confusion between the dates of Asoka's consecration and his accession to the throne.

Asoka had assumed two opposite meaning titles. First *Devanampriya* and second *Piyadasi*. Here, *Devanampriya* means Beloved of the Gods. Meaning of *Piyadasi* - Beautiful to look at. Ashoka's inscriptions use his virud instead of his name. The usage of all his titles is not found in these inscriptions. In some inscriptions, only *Devanampriya* is found. In some inscriptions, the name of Asoka is found as *Priyadarshi Raja*. In some inscriptions, *Devanampriya Asok* has been used. Due to the different titles in these different writings, scholars were busy in proving that all these inscriptions are related to Asoka. All dilemmas and confusions ended with the discovery of the Maski inscription of Asoka in which all different titles used for Asoka are found in his writings.

Asoka's inscriptions nos. 2, 5 and 13 also reveal the boundaries of his empire. These inscriptions give information about the marginal castes of Asoka's Empire such as the Cholas, Pandey's, Satyaputras and Keralaputras in the south. According to inscription 2, the boundary of Asoka's empire in the north-western region coincided with the kingdom of King Antiochus of Syria. Thus, Asoka's inscriptions give an impression of the boundaries of Asoka's empire. Perhaps in such a large empire, Asoka could have visited all its parts during his lifetime.

Asoka describes in his inscription no. 13 that he was victorious only once in his lifetime and that was the Kalinga conquest. Asoka conquered Kalinga eight years after his consecration, i.e. around 262 BC. There was a lot of loss of life and property in this war. We can see the losses in this war in three ways. Firstly, the loss of soldiers who fought in the war, the injured or their imprisonment, secondly the loss

of the families of these soldiers and thirdly, the suffering caused to the aggrieved person of these soldiers and the friends of his family. Thus, Asoka describes the losses caused by war in a very modern way.

Asoka made non-violence the main mantra of his life. At the same time, Asoka changed his personal religion and adopted Buddhism because it was the strongest supporter of non-violence at that time. In the small Rock Inscription 1 Asoka says that - 'Earlier I was only a worshipper, had never done hard work but only after one year of joining the Sangh, I worked hard.'

On the basis of these inscriptions, we come to the conclusion that after Asoka's conquest of Kalinga, the desire and dedication for Buddhism became very intense. Asoka was a follower of Buddhism even before the conquest of Kalinga. But till then Ashoka did not give much importance to religion. Asoka remained only a worshipper in Buddhism for two and a half years i.e., 265-262 BC. It is clear that Asoka had converted his religion in 265 BC. The confirmation of the year of Asoka's conversion is also correct according to the Mahavansh (v, 37-48). According to the Mahavansh, Nigrodha, son of Asoka's elder brother Sushim, had converted Asoka to Buddhist.

After the conquest of Kalinga (262 BC), Asoka's attachment to religion increased. He increased his devotion and efforts towards religion. In 260 BC, Asoka started his first religious journey, under which he probably went to Bodh Gaya first. Asoka declared his religious declarations under 14 inscriptions. According to pillar inscription 6, Asoka issued them after 12 years of his consecration, i.e., between 258 - 257 BC. In pillar inscription 6, Asoka says that after 12 years of his consecration, I have got this scripture written for the welfare and happiness of the people, so that they can spread the words of religion in different ways.

To give stability and permanence to his inscriptions, Asoka got them carved on rocks and pillars. This is the reason that from the time of Asoka to the present day, except a few inscriptions of Asoka, all the inscriptions have been read, so that we get information about the time of Asoka. Asoka's religious conversion brought significant changes in his personal life and social life.

Asoka also wanted to establish peace with his frontier regions and tribes under his policy of non-violence. As Asoka says in his inscription no. 13 that he will forgive even if someone disrespects him. To all the frontier tribes that have remained unconquered, I wish that they should not fear me, believe in me, get happiness from me and never get hurt. Thus, Asoka propounds the principle of equality between his territories and the frontier regions and tribes. Whether they are big or small, he looks at the sovereignty and independence of the individual equally. Even today, efforts are being made to implement this principle in the world, which Asoka has presented in his time. Asoka could have easily conquered these territories if he wanted, but he did not do so. Going further, Asoka's wish was that his sons, grandsons etc. should also follow this path. He should not make any kind of conquest. Asoka now considers Dharma Vijay as his important victory instead of victory through arms.

Asoka made the spiritual progress of the subjects his main objective. For this purpose, Asoka started many cultural programs to connect his subjects with him. So that he can get the cooperation of the public and he should create religious feelings among the people. Asoka started a variety



of programs such as processions of elephants, Agnijwala, Deepmalika etc. In these processions, the idols of deities were displayed. These idols could have belonged to any deity belonging to any sect. It seems that this practice was probably started by Asoka himself. At that time, perhaps the statues of Buddha or Bodhisattvas were not included in the display because idol worship had not started in Buddhism during the time of Asoka. Idol worship begins with the Mahayana sect of Buddhism, which came into existence after Asoka.

Asoka was also a great constructor. The Buddhist tradition credits him with the construction of 84 thousand stupas. He had enriched the stupa of Kanakmuni and had got the caves made for the Ajivikas by cutting down the hills evenly. His inscription pillars are excellent examples of architecture. He also got the establishment of two cities named Srinagar in Kashmir and Devpatan in Nepal.

The following lines of the famous historian H.G. Wells correctly assess the personality and character of Asoka - "The name of Ashoka is bright among the pillars of history like kings, emperors, religious officers, saints, etc., and often shines like a lonely star in the sky. His name is respected even today from the Volga to Japan. China, Tibet and India too, although it has abandoned its principles, have retained the tradition of its greatness. People who ever heard the name of Constantine or Charlemagne remember him with even more reverence." Similarly Charles Eliot has written that he stands alone in the gallery of the holy emperors, perhaps like a man who had fondness for a balanced, compassionate and happy life. He neither aspired to great mysteries nor was engrossed in his own soul. But he was only a benefactor of man and animal. Describing Ashoka as the greatest emperor of India, RC Dutta wrote, "No emperor of India, not even Vikramaditya, has achieved such worldwide prestige and no one hasn't produced much effect in world history because of his zeal for righteousness and virtue."

### Conclusion

Ashoka's place in world history is absolutely unique. He was the first national ruler in the true sense. When we see that even today the countries of the world are not able to succeed in spite of making constant efforts to stop the arms race and to avert the horrors of war and there is a serious threat of nuclear war for humanity, then Ashoka's works become clear by itself. Ashoka's lofty ideals guide us even today for the establishment of world peace. Independent India has paid its true tribute to this great priest of humanity by accepting the lion-head of the Sarnath pillar as its emblem.

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