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The ideals from Ashokan rock edicts and their relevance in the modern state

Abstract

Vincent Arthur Smith has written that more than two thousand years ago, India's first emperor had already achieved that level of scientific administrative efficiency for which his British successors later sighed in vain, and which even the Mughal emperors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were never able to attain fully. The pillars and rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka are scattered across the country from one end to the other. He had rocks cut to construct caves for monks, commissioned—according to Buddhist tradition—the construction of 84,000 stupas, and erected pillars at various places whose polish and brilliance are extraordinary. The Ashokan pillars are unique examples of craftsmanship. Carved out of a single block of stone, standing about 40–50 feet high, their smooth, lustrous finish has amazed people of every age. On the Sarnath pillar, the lions display an extraordinary sense of strength and vitality; the naturalism visible in their swollen veins is unparalleled—not only in Indian sculpture but in the sculpture of the entire world. Ashoka's greatness stemmed not only from the size of his kingdom and his skill at running it, but also from his personality and the principles and objectives he aspired to preserve in his role as king.

Key words: Emperor Ashoka, Rock Edicts, Dhamma, ideals, Ethical Governance

Introduction

Ashoka's ideal of kingship emphasized constant accessibility to the voice of the people, highlighting his duty to their welfare above all else (Rajendraprasad Singh, 2024). Born to Emperor Bindusara and Dhamma, Ashoka Maurya, grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, ruled a vast Indian subcontinent from approximately 268 to 232 BCE. His empire spanned from the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan to present-day Bangladesh, with Pataliputra (modern Bihar) as his capital and provincial centers in Takshashila and Ujjaini. The Mauryan kingdom marked a significant consolidation of statehood in India and was recognized as the largest and richest kingdom globally at the time (Sen, 2022). Ashoka is considered as one of the greatest Indian emperors, with personalities like Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore praising his legacy of compassion and kindness rather than conquest, a quality that continues to inspire even in the modern age (Khanna, 2020). His rock edicts and Buddhist literature represents his humanitarian governance and foundational role in shaping the present Indian republic.

Ashoka: a king without sorrow

The Maurya period was a period of a harmonious society, with honesty and minimal conflict, reflecting the ideals of 'Sat Yuga'. In his book "Discovery of India", Jawaharlal Nehru highlights on the moral superiority of Emperor Ashoka, whose inscriptions highlight his reflective approach to leadership and ethical governance. Unlike other Asian rulers who focused on obedience in their public communications, Ashoka's inscriptions served to

promote moral values and the welfare of the society. This unique perspective distinguishes his legacy as having a significant influence on contemporary authors compared to other strong leaders of ancient India. (Lahiri, 2015).

6 In a span of forty years, Ashoka unified the Indian subcontinent under a single government, elevated Buddhism from a minor sect to a major world religion, and implemented moral principles that continue to influence Asia. Dr. Smith notes that over two millennia ago, Ashoka achieved a level of governance that later British rulers, and even the Mughal emperors of the 16th–17th centuries, could not replicate. Though his rise to power involved familial violence, evidenced by the fratricide for the throne, he later experienced a profound transformation. Following the Kalinga War, Ashoka renounced violence and pledged never to engage in warfare again.

5 During Ashoka's reign the steps toward social welfare, direct communication with citizens and the propagation of "dharma" were taken resulting in an ethical and considerate state. Unlike typical monarchies, he held himself and his officials responsible to high ethical standards, which was not common until the 20th century. His commitment towards non-violence and concern for the welfare of his subjects earned him admiration and changed the course of Indian history drastically. (Kumar, H. 2017)

Mauryan Empire, Administration and Reign of Ashoka (268-232 BCE)

Megasthenes, a Greek ambassador to Chandragupta Maurya who wrote Indica, said that the great empire of Ashoka extended over large part of the world. His reign experienced significant improvements in the administration of India, in the form of decentralized system which divided into provinces and districts. Megasthenes wrote about the Mourya period that the people of India did not tell lies, very rarely go to the courts of law and never lock their houses. Kautilyas arthashastra, which is a fundamental work on governance, economy, diplomacy and statecraft of this period deals with various aspects of administration, said that the king is accountable for law and order, security and welfare of the people. He was expected to be accessible and disciplined. Also, wise council of ministers (Mantriparishad) assist the king in decision making and the policies were form and implemented with proper consultation with the advisors. Kautilya talked about the strict commitment to people's welfare and unforgiving approach towards corruption.

7 The Ashokan edicts and kautilyas arthashastra are important sources of information regarding administration and law and order during the Mouryan empire. The Kingship is passed to the eldest son, and he must be educated in administration, governance and military tactics. He has to have some knowledge about the traditional culture and vedic mythology. His daily routine was very strict and he had only six hours for sleep. He spent his whole time working with officers, checking on the army and attending meetings with ministers. King has to be a meritorious scholar and must always be a public figure dedicated to the service of the people. A king is expected to be strong, as a lack of diligence could lead to their downfall at the hands of adversaries. Kautilya insisted that the appointments of ministers should strictly made on merit and not on bias. The secret agents judged the candidates on their attitude towards piety, income, lust and fear. The successful candidates were given the post of revenue officials, judges and personal bodyguards of king. The spies play an important role in the

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administration and justice as they assist judges in the case resolution. Even if the empire had a good governing system set up by the ashoka, the empire quickly fell apart and lasted less than 50 years after his death. (Kumar, G. 2017; Mark and Dharma, 2026).

The Kalinga Turning Point: Remorse and Awakening

Kalinga was an ancient kingdom consist of most of modern-day Orissa, parts of Madhya Pradesh and present northern Telangana. It was a prosperous region notable for its rich agriculture produce and flourishing maritime trade with Burma, Ceylon, java and Malay. Kalinga became independent after downfall of Nanda dynasty in 321 BCE. It was earlier in the control of Maha Padmananda of Magadha. The Mauryan rulers Chandragupta and Bindusara could not able to annex it. It was a serious political and economic problems for Mauryan control of eastern trade routes. Kalinga was situated between the Indo-Gangetic plain and peninsular India, and was the control point of land routes from Pataliputra to the south. Its forested hinterland linked central India via tribal areas, and was therefore of militarily important. The Mahabharata mentions the Kalinga tribe, after which the region is named, as a warrior kingdom with varied arms and apparel. Chandragupta's conquests met with resistance which his grandson Ashoka tried to overcome. In the 12th year of his rule, Ashoka demanded the ruler of Kalinga to submit to him. The refusal sparked an armed conflict directly in 261 BCE. Romila Thapar (2002), says that the main reason for ashoka's campaign against kalinga was to consolidate the empire even though the established monarchical democracy of kalinga preferred independence. The kalinga war was fought with strong resistance and large-scale mobilization of forces on both the sides. The 60000 infantry, 1000 cavalry and 700 war elephants defended the state of kalinga. (V. C. Team, 2026). The Greek ambassador Megasthenes described Mauryan forces as about one lakh soldiers with 1,700 horses and thousands of elephants. The war ended in 261 BCE. There was a massive devastation where large number of people choose death rather than humiliation. The location where war took place is known as Dhauli hills, along the daya river which is marked by Ashoka's rock edict no 13.

The Rock Edict XIII records 100,000 deaths and 150,000 deported captives after the battle. The war greatly influences the attitude towards violence and politics adopted by king Ashoka. After witnessing battlefield destruction, Ashoka was greatly shocked by his experience and decided to abandon war, giving priority to kindness rather than victory. (Thapar R., 2002). Kalinga was now a part of the Magadhan Empire like Prachaya, Avanti, Uttarapatha and Dakshinapatha. The 13th Rock Edict of Ashoka mentioned that Ashoka felt great remorse about the suffering the war caused. This is unique in a sense that not many old-time rulers have done before. Ashoka prioritized to live in peace with the kingdoms around him like the Cholas and the Pandyas and the Greek rulers. This is very different from how his father Bindusara and his grandfather Chandragupta built the empire, which was by using the military to win battles. Ashoka changed his way of conquest by sword with "Dharma-Vijaya", promoting moral governance and tolerance. While Ashoka adopted Buddhism as his religion, his edicts were secular and pragmatic in nature as a means of appealing to everyone under his rule. (Basham, 1954; Jayswal, B. K, 2025; Thapar, 1995, 2002; Keay, 2000).

The Transition: from Bherighoṣa to Dhammaghoṣa

2

Ideals, are high standards that guide human behavior and social structures. (Radhakrishnan, 1951). Ashoka is a perfect example of how ideals affect actions and governance. At first, Ashoka had ambitions for conquering and dominating others. He had 'Bherighoṣa' in mind, which is directly connected to violent tendencies to fulfill his political desires. Nevertheless, after the disastrous results that followed the Kalinga War, Ashoka changed his moral direction and decided to have Dhammaghoṣa as his new ideal which prioritize compassion and well-being of others. This is a turning point in the history of Magadha and India, where the era of military domination gives way to ideological domination through the concept of Dhamma. Ashoka envisioned himself as a parent who guides his citizens to follow those ideals. He reframed his foreign policy, opting to spread Buddhism and peace ideologically rather than expanding through military conquests by sending missionaries to distant regions such as Sri Lanka, Central Asia, Greece, and West Asia. It should be noted that in doing this, Ashoka was not motivated by pacifism as an end to itself.

Following his conquest of Kalinga, Ashoka kept the territory and continued with the army left by Chandragupta Maurya. He appointed Rajukas with the mandate to offer rewards and punishments and appointed Dhamma-Mahamatras to promote Dharma among different communities, such as women. Contrary to other officials, the Dhamma Mahāmātras concentrated on their moral and social responsibilities to encourage religious tolerance and good governance. The emphasis on morality and its link to good governance were mentioned in Minor Rock Edict V as: "It is hard to do good and he who does good, does a difficult thing."

Historical Context of the Ashokan Rock Edicts

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What makes the inscriptions or edicts of Ashoka different is that they portray the thoughts of Emperor himself, who made a total of 33 inscriptions that have been categorized as major and minor rock edicts and pillar edicts in Prakrit (Pali) language and Brahmi script. The inscriptions can be found in places throughout Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Nepal. Some important discoveries are 14 Major Rock Edicts, which include one called the "Kandahar Greek Edict" which is bilingual, that is written in both Greek and Aramaic, while the rest are found within the Gangetic plain. The Minor Rock Edicts represent the earliest inscriptions made. In addition, the Major Pillar Edicts are known to be the most detailed, again mostly from the Gangetic Plain. Only four sites explicitly mentioned the name "Ashoka." Are Maski, Brahmagiri (Karnataka), Gujjara (MP) and Nettur (AP). (Basham A 1982; Admin, 2024b; vajiramandravi, 2026).

While the first rock edict of the Ashoka emperor does not refer to any kind of yajña or havana, though historians say there was animal sacrifice involved, it has been claimed that the connection drawn between Ashoka's inscriptions and the Vedas by historians is entirely arbitrary, as the only god referred to in the edicts is the Buddha. This raises questions about the description of Ashoka as "beloved of the gods."

3

Ashoka's Rock Edict II focuses on Dhamma-related welfare, including medical care for humans and animals, infrastructure like roads and wells, and tree planting. Rock Edict III

3 emphasizes the importance of reverence for parents and all living beings, particularly Brahmanas and Sramanas. Rock Edict IV highlights nonviolence towards animals and kindness to relatives. (Singh, U. 2008)

Rock Edicts V and VI focus on the appointment of Dhamma mahamattas and their reporting duties to the monarch at any time. Edicts VII and VIII promote tolerance among various sects and recount Emperor Ashoka's Dhamma yatras, including his inaugural visit to Bodhi Gaya. Rock Edict IX bans ceremonies performed by mothers and wives.

Rock Edict X criticizes celebrity and emphasizes adherence to Dhamma, while Edict XI elaborates on its principles, such as respect for elders, non-violence towards animals, and generosity to friends. Edict XII advocates for sectarian tolerance, and Edict XIII is crucial for understanding Ashoka's Dhamma policy, promoting victory through Dhamma instead of war, referencing his conquest of Kalinga. Edict XIV addresses a Dhamma-related document designed to encourage responsible behavior among people. (NCERT. 2023).

The Buddha's teachings were most authentically compiled by Emperor Ashoka through his rock edicts, created close to the Buddha's time, minimizing manipulation risks. The reliability of these inscriptions is enhanced by their stone engravings. (Rajendraprasad Singh, 2024).

Concept of Dhamma in the Ashokan Rock Edicts

2 It is hard to do good and he who does good, does a difficult thing. (MRE 5th)

- Emperor Ashoka

Ashoka's transformation and the policy of dhamma Vijaya marked a shift in Indian political tradition. It gives emphasis on cultural unity over direct political control. This concept is described as a civilizational state, as against contemporary European notions of sovereignty. According to Rock Edict No. III, officials were required to inspect their territories every five years, with an emphasis on preaching Dharma and promoting virtues like obedience, liberality, and non-violence. The council of Ministers are responsible to ensure that the people must adhere to these principles.

Rock Edict V of Ashoka stresses that while it is easy to do wrong, it is tough to encourage good conduct. The emperor appointed officers called Dhamma Mahamatras to improve the well-being and happiness of various people such as prisoners and old people. They ensured that there was justice, kindness, and harmony between different religions. This shows Ashoka's moral leadership and commitment to ethical principles for the benefit of society.

5 The emperor's devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha is articulated in Minor Rock Edict III. He emphasizes the importance of preserving the genuine Dhamma and encourages the reading and retention of specific Buddhist texts by monks, nuns, and lay followers to promote Buddhist moral and spiritual teachings. (Dhammika, V. S. 1993).

Ashoka's dhamma policy is different than the Buddha's teachings as it acts as a policy rather than a spiritual way of life. In Rock Edict XI it says that the values such as obedience to parents, non-violence and politeness to servants should be promoted. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Ashoka's dhamma policy does not have specific Buddhist traits, and it has common ethical standards which are common to other religious faiths. Among the values promoted by Ashoka, there were purity of heart and honesty, which are consistent with the teachings in the Dhammapada. Ashoka's dhamma teaches moral leadership, civic ethics and personal virtues in contrast to the Kautilya who relied on compulsion as the main way to govern people. Ashoka wanted the ruler to be an example which promotes universal welfare through justice and public welfare initiatives encouraging tolerance and pluralism, which is an important precedent to modern secular governance in India.

Political and Social Ideals in the Rock Edicts

Ashoka gives importance to dignity and connection with his subjects which promote his dhamma policy for all. He believed that ethical conduct of the ruler is the only qualification needed to rule over the subjects. Romila Thapar says that Ashoka served as a model for Yudhishtira in the Mahabharata as initially Yudhishtira did not want to be a king in Shanti Parva. Yudhishtira's acceptance of kingship has Ashoka's influence on it.

Ashoka's Rock Edicts II, III, and V give emphasis to compassion and equity in governance. It gives importance to moral principles rather than punishment. They promote a dhamma-based government which focused on fairness, compassion and accountability to people. Rock Edict II introduces the concept of a welfare state, with initiatives such as medical facilities for humans and animals, tree planting, well drilling, and animal protection. In Rock Edict XIII, dhamma Vijaya must precede over any other kind of victory and the Rock Edict XIII underlines Ashoka's commitment to these principles.

Dhamma was the emphasis of Ashoka that helped in solving the moral problems of his society. The principles of harmony, respect, kindness, and self-discipline were promoted by Ashoka through Rock Edict III and VII. Ashoka believed in the importance of obeying one's parents and respecting one's elders; he also supported kindness toward animals.

The political system established by Emperor Ashoka facilitated direct interaction between the ruler and the citizens, stressing that "All men are my children." The emperor focused on caring for the needs of his people, similar to how a nurse takes care of her child. Remarkably progressive for his period, Ashoka emphasized equality and unity in social interactions amongst different groups within society. His political philosophy set up such high benchmarks that other kings found it impossible to follow. His political thought contributed immensely to modern politics, especially constitutional developments after World War II.

Ashoka's Ideals and the Modern State

Emperor Ashoka was distinguished for his commitment for protecting both human and animal rights. In Rock Edict XIII, he described his approach as "conquest by morality" or Dhamma Vijaya. Basically, Ashoka wanted people to inculcate nonviolence and work together—not just because it was good, but because it was right. That mindset still matters a lot in how we run things today. The principles of Dhamma pushed for fair governance, and one can see echoes of that in India's democracy. The Right to Information Act of 2005—it's

all about making government transparent, lines up with Ashoka's push for ethics in leadership. (Rajendraprasad Singh, 2024; Sinha, N. C., 1994).

During Ashoka's reign, resources were redirected from warfare to social welfare, promoting stability and prosperity. His unique governance was noticeable as it was committed to tolerance and nonviolence, but the limits of his Ahimsa policy were influenced by external factors. (Thapar & India International Centre, 2009). One of his most important contributions to the concept of Dhamma was the principle that ethics or Dhamma must be at the root of governmental power, which is seen as an ethical code of conduct based on principles of kindness, self-restraint, truthfulness, and non-violence. These principles apparent in contemporary practices such as constitutional morality and the accountability of public officials, offering a framework for interfaith harmony during the course of India's religious tensions. The ideas recommended by Ashoka concerning the need to protect animals and plants can be related to modern day environmental concerns such as those incorporated in project like project Tiger which shares similarity with Dhamma ethos. Another element that reflects Ashoka's tolerance include initiative towards interfaith dialogues by NGOs and the government.

The idea of the modern state emerged first in the writings of Niccolo Machiavelli in his book 'The Prince'. This differs from the Greek understanding of polis, where the emphasis is on the rights and duties of citizens, not on obedience to the authority. The State functions through government, which interprets and implements its will. Emperor Ashoka typified these principles by promoting Dhamma, which emphasize upon moral governance, religious tolerance, and equality among citizens. He maintained a strong defence while ensuring cultural diplomacy and welfare initiatives. Ashoka's commitment to giving equal respect toward various faiths was crucial for the success of his Dhamma policy. For this he relies on persuasion and self-interest rather than coercion. This reflects the ethical expectations of leadership even 2328 years ago.

Critical Evaluation of Ashokan Ideals

The influence of Buddhism under Ashoka had a great impact on the moral and ethical aspects of how the government worked in ancient India. Ashoka promoted Buddhism through the establishment of monasteries and educational centres which helped in advancing philosophical inquiry and ethical instruction among the citizens. The Ashokan edicts were placed on trade routes and crowded areas are important for spreading his messages. Romila Thapar says that both Ramayana and Mahabharata were Brahmanized texts which indicate the shift in their narrative and ethical guidelines. (Gokhale, 1955, p. iv). The principles mentioned in the Ashokan edicts inspired the discussions in the shanti parva of Mahabharata regarding the king's virtues, peace and ethics in governance. But the concept of ethics varies tremendously as what is seen as ethical by one group of people may be viewed as immoral by the other. Ashoka, the great wanted to guide his people to follow dhamma policy. Thapar says that this is egocentric behaviour to say by the king that "This is my principle: to protect through Dhamma, to administer affairs according to Dhamma, to please the people with Dhamma and to guard the empire with Dhamma" (Thapar, 2012, p. 219). It raises the question on Ashoka's dhamma policy as to how absolute this Dhamma policy can be because they are just the ethical guidelines that was meant to promote the well-being of society. Today, lack of morality in government presents difficulties to political rulers and authorities.

Ashoka has a deep commitment to the public good and he knows the importance of accessibility that's why he insisted his officials to be available all the time so that the people can come and talk to them. According to historian Romila Thapar, Ashokan inscriptions represent some of the earliest evidence of writings in India, as there is no definite way to decode the Indus script. Romila Thapar further says that the Vedic period, which is often regarded as the foundation of Indian history, pre-exist Ashoka's reign. Initially, the Vedas were primarily transmitted orally and they were only transcribed in the second millennium AD. The majority of inscriptions from the Ashoka's time are in Brahmi and Prakrit; however, those found in North West India also utilize Greek, Aramaic, and Kharosthi scripts. Notably, Ashoka chooses for Prakrit in Brahmi script even in areas dominated by Dravidian languages in the South. This raise questions about his choice to not adopt the local languages. Despite his capacity for military engagement, Ashoka is primarily recognized for his adherence to the policy of Dhamma, which stands opposite to the historical narratives that might labelled him as a conqueror, who focused on violent conflict, as the inscriptions reflect themes of peace and moral governance. Romila Thapar says that Ashoka's legacy and thought is deeply mentioned in these inscriptions which advocate for a more inclusive and kind-hearted leadership style, showcasing his unique approach to leadership. (Thapar, 2013).

Conclusion

The Ashokan inscriptions are the ideas and ethics which has deep impact of Buddhism on it and these are practical guidelines which are more concerned with decreasing suffering and improving life rather than just theoretical speculations..

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