



Dissemination of the Message of World Peace as recorded in the Edicts of Emperor Ashoka

Dr. Rupali Mokashi
Head, Department of History
R K Talreja College of
Arts, Science and Commerce
Ulhasnagar, Dist. Thane

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Abstract

The large corpus of didactic rock edicts of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka is a storehouse of direct communication between him and his subjects. This is one of the rare instances in the world history. Engraved in different languages, dialects and scripts, the edicts reveal the thoughts of the emperor regarding harmony peace and administration in his temporal as well as ecclesiastical realm.

The edicts of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka are considered to be the earliest available and deciphered corpus of inscriptions in ancient India. They are placed in 3rd century BCE. They are discovered in a large geographical area extending from Kandahar in Afghanistan, Rummindei (Lumbini) Nepal, Sopara and Girnar in western coast of India, Dhauli and Jaugada in Odisha and Karnataka and Telangana in South India. The idea of recording his thoughts on a permanent surface was probably copied from the Achaemenid empire, who had a longstanding tradition of engraving inscriptions at the necropolis sites of Behistun and Naksh-i-Rostom. The idea of deploying various scripts, dialects and languages has also been used by emperor Ashoka. We are unable to know the exact issuers of Mahasthan, Sohagura and Piprahva inscriptions. The script of the Harappan people yet remains to be deciphered. Thus, the edicts of Emperor Ashoka are the earliest deciphered inscriptions of Indian subcontinent. It was after the series of efforts put in by various scholars and curious minded

Sultan like Feroz Tughlaq that ancient Brahmi and Kharoshthi scripts were finally deciphered by James Prinsep in a series of articles between 1836 and 1838.

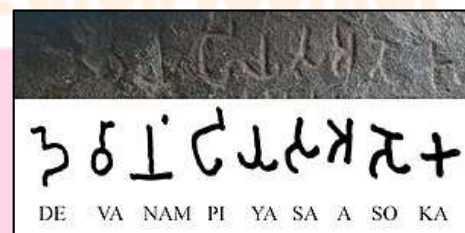
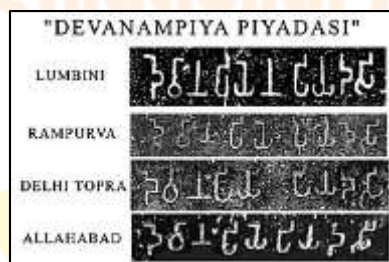
It will not be inappropriate to acknowledge the work of scholars who have studied the corpus of these edicts. The pioneering effort was of course put in by James Prinsep. Sir Alexander Cunningham compiled and published them 1877 in the first volume of Corpus Inscriptinun Indicarum which was revised by E. Hultzsch in 1925. Thereafter there were new discoveries like Erragudi, Sopara, minor edicts, Greek and Aramaic edicts which were studied by scholars in due course of time. A C Woolner, R G Basak, D C Sircar and latest work by Norman-Allachin and Harry Falk Are some of the notable works.

The edicts can be categorised on the basis of content and medium that is engraved on. Thus, we find subcategories of major edicts, minor edits, pillar edits, separate edicts and cave inscriptions. The content in each of these categories is distinct and separate and it is copied on different sites with minor regional dialectical as well as linguistic variations. These edicts are didactic in nature and are the proclamation of emperor's moral and religious sentiments.

Identification and date of the emperor

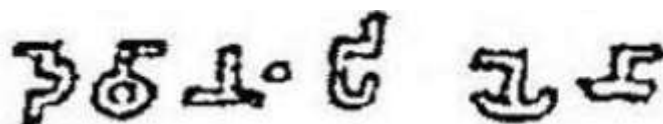
In most of the inscriptions Ashoka identifies himself as 'devanam piya piyadassi raja/laja'.

It is only in the Calcutta-Bairat Edit that he is known as 'प्रियदसि लाजा मागधे'. Yet the identification was not very clear. it was only after the discovery of minor rock edict-I in Karnataka at Maski (1956) that gave us 'देवानं पियस असोक'.



Maski Edict

Devanam piya appears to be a family title which was also adopted by his grandson and successor Dasharatha in the donative inscriptions at Barabar Caves in Bihar.



Nagarjuni-Gopika Caves-देवानं पियेना

It is interesting to note that none of the inscriptions records any specific era or date apart from the year of the emperor's coronation which remains ambiguous due to the want of

specific proof. Thus, the minor edits are the earliest ones issued by the king and the pillar edicts are issued during the latter part of his rule.

Renunciation of war as a state policy

The early part of Emperor Ashoka's life remains enigmatic and known mostly through literary sources compiled at a later date. He inherited a large empire. He comments 'महलके हि विजिते बहु' (my dominions are wide) in Edict XIV-Shahbazgarhi regarding his vast empire. However, he had no access to the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal. It was controlled by the state of Kalinga. We do not know the name of the king of Kalinga. Emperor Ashoka planned an extensive invasion of Kalinga in the eighth year after his coronation (अठवषा भिशित कलिंग्या विजिता). Probably Kalinga also tried to defend aggression by full force. The war resulted in the victory of the Mauryas at the cost of tremendous destruction and death that left Emperor Ashoka completely devastated. What follows is one of the unique reactions of any victorious monarch. He did not hide his feelings, instead recorded it famously known as Major Rock Edict XIII (Kalsi Version). This was a conscious decision, knowing fully that the content of the inscription would survive for an eternal posterity.

Emperor Ashoka in his own words says, '150,000 people were deported 100,000 were slaughtered at the battleground, and countless number of people died. Now that the country of 'Kalingya' has been taken, Devanampriya has been devoted to a zealous study of morality and to the instruction of people in morality. This is the repentance of Devanampriya on account of his conquest of the Kalingyas. It was considered very painful and deplorable by Devanampriya that while one is conquering an unconquered country slaughter death and deportation is inevitable'.

The process that brought about a change in his mindset is narrated in his own minor inscriptions. Emperor Ashoka states 'two and half years and somewhat more have passed since I am openly a Shakya. But I had not been very zealous. But a year and more have passed since I visited the sangha and I have been very zealous.' (Rupnath Edict) Since then he embarked on long tours in the Kingdom, visiting sites and meeting people. Sometimes the tour was as long as of 256 days. He also visited Lumbini and Bodh Gaya, holy places associated with Buddhism. when the king had been anointed 10 years, he went out to Sambodhi (Bodh Gaya). (दसवसाभिसिते संतं निखमिथा संबोधि Kalsi EdictVIII) Ashoka raised an inscribed pillar at Lumbini after his visit.

He believed now in the effectiveness of conquest of morality (dhammavijaya). Emperor Ashoka proclaims that this conquest has been won repeatedly by the Devanampriya not only in his own Kingdom but also over his neighbours situated as far as 600 yojanas. He was fully aware that the political stability and peace which he created and would not sustain in the future when his sons and grandsons would rule. He says that if a conquest ought to be made in the future or was inevitable, they should resort to mercy and light punishments.

International Peace and Coexistence

After the untimely death of Alexander, his huge empire was broken and divided among his generals who were administrating various provinces. Thus, emerged new Greek dynasties like the Ptolemies in Egypt and Seleucids in West Asia. The reference of five kings ruling in West Asia is a crucial point in determining the relative dating of the rule of Emperor Ashoka. Yona King Antiyoga ruled closest, beyond him, Tulamaya, Antekina, Maka and Alikyashudala. These kings have been identified as Antiochus of Syria (Antiyoga), Ptolemy of Egypt (Tulamaya), Magas of Cyrene (Maka), Antigonus of Macedon (Antekina), Alexander of Epirus (Alikyashudala). There were independent states of Choda (Chola) and Pandya in the deep peninsular South and the island of Tamraparni (Shri Lanka) who believed and honoured the ideas of Emperor Ashoka. There is a reference of probably feudal or semi-independent states in the kings's territory like Yona, Kamboja, Nabhakas, Nabhapanktis, Bhoja, Pitinikaya, Andhra and Palanda who followed the ordinances of morality issued by Emperor Ashoka.

A careful textual study of all his rock edicts suggests an extremely heart touching gesture. The emperor has avoided reference to the entire Edict XIII at Dhauli and (Edicts XI, XII and XIII omitted) and Jaugada. Both the sites are situated in the state of Odisha, the possible site of the fatal war of Kalinga. He explains this action in his Edict XIV. He states that 'the rescripts on morality are not suitable everywhere'.

Peace-Loving yet Powerful and Vigilant Monarch

In the realm of politics, no one will listen to the advice of peace from a weak, unguarded and unaware head of the state. Emperor Ashoka's messages are a clear indication that he was a master in his statecraft. The Major Edict VI Clearly states that, 'the reporters have to report to me the affairs of the people at anytime and anywhere, while I am eating, in the harem, in the inner apartment, at the cow pen, in the palanquin and in the park. And everywhere I'm disposing off the affairs of the people. Any matters of dispute among the ministers,

amendments regarding any donation or proclamation which the king had ordered verbally, the matter should be immediately reported to the king anywhere and at any time. This suggests a vigilant disposition of the emperor.

Religious Coexistence

The king lets out a strong message of peaceful coexistence and acknowledges the existence of various sects within his kingdom. He is very clear that not only physical but also violent acts in thought and speech are detrimental. He wished his subjects to realise that violence in cruel and hateful words and actions towards other religious traditions can be equally harmful. He also expected proper curtesy to slaves and servants. (Kalsi Edict XI) He stated that, ‘all men are my children. I desire that they may be provided with complete happiness and welfare in the world and in the other world (सवेन हितसुखेन हिदलोकिक पाललोकिकाये).’

Emperor Ashoka identifies Brahamana and Shramanas i.e., the those who did not believe in the infallibility of the Vedic tradition. The Buddhist texts inform us about the existence of such eighty-two sects like Lokayata and Ajivika. He states that - there is no country where these two classes Brahmanas and Shramanas, do not exist, except among the Yonas, and there is no place in any country where men are not indeed attached to some sect. (Kalsi Edict XII) The king desired that all sects may reside everywhere (सवता इछति सवपासंड वसेवु सवे Kalsi Edict VII). The king honoured all sects’ ascetics and householders with gifts and honours of different kinds. (XII षावापाषंडानि पवजितानी गहथानि वा पूजेति दानेन विविधये च).

Emperor Ashoka has proved his thoughts by actions. Three donations been engraved by the Emperor Ashoka for the resident monks of the Ajivika sect, a Shramanik tradition from the Sudama, Karna Chaupad (कुभा सुपियेखा) and Vishvamitra (कुभा खलतिक पवतसि) situated in the Barabar-Nagarjuni Caves have. We find the continued patronage given by his grandson and successor, Devanampriya Dasharatha at Gopika Kubha, Nagarjuni Cave and Nagarjuni Vadhuayaka Cave.

Emperor Ashoka acknowledged that there is a natural tendency to praise once own school of thought and blame or criticise others. He advises his subjects not to hurt other others following different sects by their rhetoric. Other sects ought to be honoured in every way. If one is acting thus, then he is not only promoting his sect considerably but also is benefiting other sects as well. Even after two millenniums this message is effective. It can lead to peace, harmony, peaceful coexistence and end religious conflict, a major threat to the world peace in the modern times.

Mechanism to implement harmony and justice

Emperor Ashoka appointed special officers to ensure harmony and justice and implementation of his ideas in his Kingdom. These officers were directly responsible to the emperor. First Separate Rock Edict at Dhauri which is addressed to the Mahamatras, the judicial officers of Tosali. Similarly, the First Separate Rock Edict at Jaudaga is addressed to the Mahamatras of Samapa. There is a detailed list of instructions in the governance and administration to be followed by them. similar duties were to be performed by Mahamatras appointed at Takshashila and Governor Prince at Tosali and Ujjain. This was an effective way to implement his ideas still the grass route level and keeping all the officers in the loop of similar guidelines. He also appointed ithijika mahamatra to spread the ideas of dhamma among women.

Congregational ceremonial reading of the text

The text suggests that the emperor had ordered regular periodical congregational ceremonial reading of the text for the lay people. The emperor states in the second separate edit at Dhauri, 'this rescript must be listened to by all every four months, on the day of constellation of Tishya. But if desired it may be listened to by all or any single person on frequent other occasions than the day of constellation of Tishya. A special officer called Rajavachanika was appointed to recite the text to the people.

There was a certain amount of restriction on the selection of sites for the major rock edicts depending upon the availability of suitable boulders. The Major Rock edict at Jaugada was engraved on the Khepingala mountain. (इयं धंमलिपी खेपिंगलसि पवतसि देवानंपियेन पियदसिना लाजिना लिखापिता) Such was not the case for Pillar edicts which are generally placed later in date. They are mostly found in the Gangetic delta. The later part of the Sahasram edict suggests that a existing tradition of creating pillars, the purpose of which is unknown. The emperor states that, 'where there are stone pillars in my dominions, the text should be engraved on it.' This reminds us of a monolith at the holy site of Vaishali that has no inscription engraved on it.

Peaceful Coexistence in the Sangha

The concept of sangha implied that the monks would live together following the rules laid down. However, there were periodic dissensions of greater and smaller intensity. The first two congregations organised by kings Ajatashatru and Kalashoka prove that influential kings of the time had to take initiative to settle the matters and ensured peaceful coexistence in the Sangha. The third council was organised by Emperor Ashoka under the auspicious of

Mogaliputta Tissa at Pataliputra. This event of immense importance is not mentioned in any of the available inscriptions of Ashoka. However, the Allahabad Kosam, Sarnath and Sanchi Pillar Edicts bear testimony that Ashoka took initiative in settling the dissensions in the contemporary Sangha. This was his attempt to establish peace within the sangha. Allahabad Kosam Pillar Edict was addressed to the mahamatras of Kosambi. The Sarnath Pillar Edict was probably addressed to the mahamatras of Pataliputra. This inscription illustrates the method of putting up of the inscriptions as well as storing a backup copy in the regional offices of the Mahamatras. He states, 'The monk or nun who shall break up the sangha should be caused to put up white robes and to reside in a non-residence. He further states in the Sanchi Pillar Inscription that, 'for my desire is that the sangha maybe united for a long duration.' The Calcutta-Bairat Edict opens with his obeisance to the sangha (प्रियदसी लाजा मागधे संघं अभिवादे). It is one of the rare instances from the pages of history that an emperor prescribed list of expositions of the dhamma that should be read by the followers of Buddhism. The list of this text included Vinayasamukase, Aliyavasani, Anagatabhayani, Munigatha, Moneyasute, Upatisapasina and Laghulovada.

The pillar edicts that are usually placed at a later date sum up the concept of dhamma. 'What does morality include? It includes few sins, many virtuous deeds, compassion, liberality truthfulness and purity'. (कियं चु धंमे ति? अपासिनवे बहु कयाने दया दाने सचे सोचये Delhi Topra Pillar Edict-II)

The idea and works of emperor Ashoka can be summed up in his own words engraved on the colophon of the Girnar major Edict. It states '----हस्ती सर्वलोक सुखाहरो नाम' (May the entirely white elephant bring happiness to the whole world.)

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