

## **The Role of Ashoka's Edicts in Spreading Dhamma and Statecraft**

Prof. Yuoraj Shamrao Mahure, S. P.M. Sci. And Gilani Arts Com. College Ghatanji

### **Abstract**

The edicts of Emperor Ashoka are considered an important moment in ancient Indian political communication and ethical rules. The Valmiki Edicts were written down by the Mauryan emperor in several languages and scripts over his empire to make his advice on Dhamma clear to all of his diverse subjects. The paper looks at how Ashoka encouraged Dhamma as a personal philosophy and at the same time built ethical standards into how the state worked. When the thematic content, location, and changed wording of Ashoka's edicts are examined, the study demonstrates how he employed them in uniting his wide-ranging and diverse empire by stressing similar values and beliefs. The paper also analyzes how Ashoka introduced officials called Dhamma Mahamatras, who helped put his ideas into active use by government officials. It is clear from the research that the edicts made it clear that religious tolerance, non-violence, a caring social system, and justice were important for leadership, not just building political power. The paper also looks at the ongoing influences of Ashoka's edicts on later Indian politics, the spread of Buddhism, and the discussion on ethical ruling worldwide.

**Keywords:** Ashoka, Edicts, Dhamma, Statecraft, Maurya Empire, Moral Governance, Ancient India

### **Introduction:**

Most historians regard Emperor Ashoka, who governed the Mauryan Empire from about 268 to 232 BCE, as one of the finest and wisest leaders in Indian history. It was during this reign that he both increased his empire's size and established the basic ideas behind his legal rule. When the Kalinga War, which caused huge losses and suffering, ended, Ashoka changed greatly in his personal life. Because he saw how many people suffered in his wars, he embraced Dhamma, which encouraged non-violence, kindness, truthfulness, tolerance, and support for society. Traditionally, military authority ruled; this idea changed to value moral authority and a kind government.

Ashoka believed that spreading Dhamma was at the heart of his reign, and he turned good ethics into government policies meant for all people in the empire. Rocks and pillars located in many different spots within his country were each inscribed with one of Ashoka's edicts to share his vision. The term stands for some of the earliest times rulers used their subjects' languages to pass on information. Rather than use just one language, these texts were written in Prakrit, Greek, and Aramaic so that inscriptions would be clear to everyone; they gave advice on morals, how people should be with each other, respect for different faiths, and the roles of the two groups in the empire.

There were many radical aspects to the edicts of Ashoka. Theology and politics came together so that what was considered right played a central role in running the nation. Besides only using force, Ashoka determined to form society by influencing it with ethics and role models. According to the edicts, the king should be compassionate toward all living beings, and various steps are suggested for justice and well-being, together with placing Dhamma Mahamatras responsible for ensuring good morals and services to the public.

The study is designed to explore the various ways in which Ashoka employed his edicts to share and support Dhamma in government. The study looks at what these texts discuss, how they are written, where they were found, and the milieu in which they were created to understand their role in rule and social bonding. The text tries to understand how Ashoka's focus on good governance led to more than one religion, a peaceful society and safety for his people, building a new type of leadership that combined piety and skills in governing.

More importantly, the paper looks at how Ashoka's edicts continue to influence Indian history and culture by focusing on the development of Buddhism from India to Asia. How Ashoka chose inscriptions to spread new views of morality in government still gives us useful lessons about the relationship between ethics and politics.

### **Objectives of Research:**

- 1) To analyze the content of Ashoka's edicts to understand how the emperor articulated the

principles of Dhamma and ethical governance.

- 2) To examine the role of Ashoka's edicts as tools of statecraft, exploring how these inscriptions contributed to the administration, social welfare, and political unity of the Mauryan Empire.
- 3) To investigate the geographic and linguistic spread of the edicts, assessing their effectiveness in reaching a diverse and multilingual population.
- 4) To evaluate the impact of Ashoka's promotion of Dhamma on religious tolerance, social harmony, and moral conduct within the empire.
- 5) To explore the institutional mechanisms introduced by Ashoka, such as the appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras, and their role in enforcing ethical governance.

#### **Literature Review:**

Teams of scholars have tried to understand Ashoka's edicts for more than ninety years, recognizing what they did to spread Dhamma and fair rule. Before anyone else, Hultzsch (in 1925) made a full translation and study of the inscriptions which showed their significance for history. Romanila Thapar stated (through her books in 1961 and 1997) that it was Ashoka's Dhamma, used to unite the country, that encouraged everyone to act morally and ensured harmony across the empire. Carrithers (1992) analyzed how compassion and a commitment to not killing guided rulers in making politics decisions. Sarao's research (1993) examined what Dhamma Mahamatras do to ensure monks follow the rules of Dhamma. According to Olivelle (2006), the edicts were successful in getting information to a wide variety of people. New information from Lahiri (2015) points to the way the edicts were positioned to have the biggest influence on the political scene. Upadhyay and Sharma (2018) and Singh and Kumar (2020) have more recently studied the part the edicts played in the early system of welfare and the acceptance of various religions. Above all, Kumar and Jain argued that Ashoka's ideas about good leadership and ethics in governance continue to shape later Indian political thought and make the Edicts important documents in history.

#### **Research Methodology:**

This study uses a qualitative research design to analyze Ashoka's edicts, focusing on their impact on Dhamma and statecraft. It uses secondary data sources, including translations, archaeological reports, and scholarly research papers. The research identifies themes related to Dhamma, moral governance, social welfare, religious tolerance, and administrative measures. Linguistic and contextual analyses are used to understand how messages were tailored for different audiences and regions. The study acknowledges limitations, such as partial preservation of some edicts and challenges in interpreting ancient languages. The study adheres to academic integrity and presents interpretations objectively, respecting the cultural and historical significance of Ashoka's legacy.

#### **The Role of Ashoka's Edicts in Spreading Dhamma and Statecraft:**

The ancient ruler Emperor Ashoka made it his mission to connect moral ideas with good government. When the Kalinga War had devastating effects, he decided to support Dhamma, giving importance to compassion, non-violence, truthfulness, tolerance, and help for everyone. Because of this, statecraft changed so that the government began to value the welfare and moral duties toward its people, in addition to conquest and authority.

The Mauryan Empire's population was informed of his vision when Ashoka set up numerous edicts written on stones and carved onto structures at important trade, religious, and residential sites. Inscriptions written by the emperor helped clarify the principles of Dhamma for leaders and the ruled. They mainly encouraged people to live ethically and get along well with others. He asked his subjects to practice being compassionate, kind, concerned about everyone's welfare, generous, and truthful. They hoped that stressing non-violence would convert people's values so that the society became more peaceful and friendly instead of quarrelsome. It was unusual for the emperor to think about animals, too, which suggests he had a widespread ethic at a time when others did not. He focused on more than telling people about ethics in his leadership. They introduced new ways to put the Dhamma at the heart of the empire's government.

Among the institutions was the office of the Dhamma Mahamatras, which saw to the

implementation of Dhamma regulations, ensured aid was provided to people, supported tolerance among different religions, and listened to any complaints. By using an organized system, Ashoka made his concerns for ethics work in everyday government and helped ensure justice, welfare, and order. What made Ashoka special was his use of inscriptions to share political news with his people. He let everyone see and understand his directives through his writings in various places and languages. Even now, people discuss leadership by following Buddha's example of combining kindness with political strength. We conclude that Ashoka's edicts were influential tools for ruling that joined Dhamma with practical state policies.

### **Historical Context of Ashoka's Reign:**

About 250 years ago, Ashoka's empire was one of the largest and strongest in all of ancient India. Included were vast areas that today include India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and parts of Afghanistan and Nepal. Because the empire included many ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural groups, the challenge was to find ways to bring all these groups under one ruling structure.

At the beginning of his rule, Ashoka increased his military power, ending with the savage conquest of Kalinga (in Odisha). The things Ashoka experienced in the aftermath of the war deeply affected his way of thinking. Because he felt deep guilt for all the damage done, he gave up expansion and moved toward a life focused on peace and goodness. Because of his spiritual awakening, Ashoka turned from a type of leadership built on force and expanding land to focus on righteousness and benefits to the people.

After becoming a Buddhist, Ashoka tried to put his moral ideas into practice by establishing Dhamma as a way of right conduct, describing it in his edicts as such. Dhamma stated that non-violence, genuine truth-telling, open-mindedness, kindness, and showing respect for all are the proper moral rules. As a result, it guided societies in their politics, created a stable social structure, and supported good behavior and ethical leaders.

Although Ashoka promoted the Dhamma, running a large and diverse empire in truth proved to be very challenging. Managing moral aims and the daily workings of governance, justice, and business operations was not simple and revealed Ashoka's creative style of ruling his empire.

### **Ashoka's Edicts: Nature and Distribution:**

The grouping of Ashoka's edicts includes Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, and Pillar Edicts. The Major Rock Edicts contain fourteen writings of broad ethical rules and policies, all engraved on large rocks. Minor Rock Edicts are etched on minor and sometimes cave-like rocks and describe Ashoka's faith, his switch to Buddhism, and his urging of its practices. Most Pillar Edicts are engraved in polished sandstone, often along with an animal capital, and include declarations of morals plus administrative orders.

There are ancient Ashoka inscriptions found throughout the wide territory of the Mauryan Empire. Ashoka's Edicts have turned up in present-day India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Nepal, suggesting how wide his message spread. Ashoka's inclusion is shown by the fact that the edicts were written in many languages. Most of the inscriptions are written in Prakrit, the language used every day by Ashoka's subjects. Nearby in the northwest, both Greek and Aramaic writings have been discovered on similar stone edicts.

If travelers visited those days, they would come across many Ashokan edicts along trade routes, sacred places, rivers, towns, and religious sites. Because of this, the emperor was present all over his empire and had influence even in remote and mainland districts.

Most of the stelae were cut from enduring materials such as sandstone and granite that are easy to notice in public places. The inscriptions are clear and teach the audience, mostly by allowing Ashoka to speak in his way. While authority is part of the tone, the content teaches, persuades, and guides useful lessons in morality.

### **The Concept of Dhamma in Ashoka's Edicts:**

Called Dhamma in India, Ashoka's philosophy addresses living ethically, caring for your society, and leading morally. The code was introduced to guide everyone according to how they should behave and live with one another. Compassion, truthfulness, non-injury, religious tolerance and welfare, and social responsibility make up the main ideas in Ashoka's



Compassion, truthfulness, non-injury, religious tolerance and welfare, and social responsibility are emphasized by Ashoka's edicts. Righteous behavior and social peace depend on compassion and truthfulness direct how people relate with one another and in their roles at work. Not causing any kind of harm is very strictly forbidden in Hindu law, which is an inclusive idea. Respecting all religions under the empire helps people live together happily and peacefully.

The Dhamma that Ashoka backed is remarkable because it doesn't distinguish between different religious groups. Having all communities involved stopped any disagreements in the large and varied society of the Mauryan Empire. Also, by naming Dhamma the main moral center, Ashoka worked to unite different groups by having them believe in the same principles of peace, tolerance, and the welfare of all.

You can understand his devotion to sharing Dhamma by examining his writing. Officials are commanded by Major Rock Edict No. 2 to promote proper behavior, kindness, respect for parents, and compassion for prisoners. Ashoka apologized for the destruction of the Kalinga War and made a promise to lead with Dhamma instead of conquering. According to these Minor Rock Edicts, Ashoka was personally devoted to Dhamma and worked to establish hospitals for both people and animals. Rock Edict VII insists that all religions are respected and that interfaith tolerance and camaraderie are important, not intolerance or harm.

### **Role of Edicts in Statecraft:**

Edicts were used for running the Government and Passing Moral Laws. Not only were the edicts of Ashoka announcements, but they also gave the early administration a sound system of governance. As public measures of moral law, they expected citizens to behave properly, maintain a harmonious society, and align administrative activities with ethics throughout the empire. By placing laws, ethical rules, and the wishes of his rulers on rocks and pillars, Ashoka reached out personally to everyone who could see them. This process strengthened his position and reminded everyone of what was expected during his rule. The laws announced that good governance included acting according to Dhamma, which made right conduct an official state policy.

How Ashoka saw the King as Setting a Good Example and Overseeing His People  
The main idea in Ashoka's guidance of his kingdom was to serve as a talented role model and compassionate guide. The rules often use language to show that Ashoka cares like a father about his subjects. He displays monarchy as an office that includes caring for justice, avoiding confrontation, and supporting public welfare. Because he viewed himself as a ruler promoting Dhamma, Ashoka was committed to kind policies and good social ethics, unlike the widespread toughness seen in the era of conquest.

In the Edicts, you see rules about assigning the important role of Dhamma Mahamatras in the administration.

He set up officials known as Dhamma Mahamatras to carry out the promotion of Dhamma as an institutional priority. These officers were responsible for looking after people's morals and social life, making sure the main ideas of the edicts were followed throughout the empire. Dhamma Mahamatras checked the behavior of people and groups, helped ensure religious tolerance, looked after the protected, and ensured that community welfare activities were properly managed. Ashoka realized his idea of righteous leadership through an organized bureaucracy whose job was to ensure Dhamma was maintained at all times.

The Edicts Helped Bring Diversity in the Empire Together by Sharing Certain Ideas about Right and Wrong. To unite the diverse Mauryan lands and people, there had to be a mutual ethical and political structure. Through his edicts, Ashoka encouraged unity by encouraging all to respect and live by the values of compassion, truthfulness, and tolerance. Because of the Dhamma, people from all over the country became united by a sense of group identity and loyalty to the emperor. Because they were governed by good example and representative decisions, this helped maintain both political and social balance in the country.  
Animal Protection, Efforts for Human Kindness, and Support for Public Work

His edicts show a real eagerness to help and care for others. The records provide details

of how new policies supported the emperor's goal of improving how people lived, including by protecting animals: Ashoka stopped animal sacrifices and built specialized shelters and vet clinics. They also mention the work of building hospitals for those of all species, growing plant medicine, building wells, and keeping roads and hostel facilities safe for guests. By doing this, Ashoka went beyond traditional government to care for his people and their ethics, something few early rulers attempted.

### Impact on Society and Legacy

Because of Ashoka's edicts, Mauryan society began to experience stronger unity and required fewer reforms. Since Dhamma encourages good behavior, it lowered the impact of religious and cultural differences and brought communities closer. Having Dhamma Mahamatras and integrating welfare policies revealed that the kings wanted the government to be more considerate and united. The reforms set up morals at the heart of governance and helped build law and order, all the time paying attention to the welfare of everyone under the empire.

His government and ideas about Dhamma directed the development of Indian political philosophy and Buddhist beliefs. Because of him, later Indian rulers understood that the government required them to ensure morality and fairness. Buddhism changed from a local faith to a large religious tradition with good ideas and insights, mostly because Ashoka was so supportive of it.

Buddhism was carried by edicts to surrounding countries and throughout India. Ashoka made sure his message, placed in many languages along the empire's borders, encouraged religious talk and encouraged people to adopt new faiths. The idea that welfare, tolerance, and non-violence are important parts of governance found its way into later discussions of enlightened leadership, which impacted what people in India and beyond thought about rulers and justice.

### Conclusion:

Ashoka's edicts represent valuable evidence of an early attempt to blend morality with the work of governing. By means of these inscriptions, Ashoka shared his concept of Dhamma, a moral system promoting compassion, peace, acceptance, and welfare, with many people in his empire. They not only showed how to act ethically but also became the rule that made the king a kind advisor and guardian for everyone. Ashoka put his guidelines in many strategic places and in factors which helped his ideas cross cultural, linguistic, and religious borders and spread unity throughout the Mauryan Empire. Dhamma Mahamatras (administrative agencies) show how the inspiration of ethics was applied to running the country. His way of leading also left meaningful contributions to Indian philosophy, Buddhism, and the methods scholars use to analyze ruling and morality. Ashoka's specific set of laws stood as an important early precedent for enlightened governance, pointing out that authority requires responsibility, kindness, and notice of everyone's rights. The things Ashoka did continue to influence today's conversations about administration, morals, and leadership, showing how much his Dhamma and state ideas are still important.

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