

# **Asoka's Humanitarian Work and Missionary Activities: A Popular Governance of Maurya Administration**

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**Abstract:** *Emperor Asoka occupies a glorious place in world history. Historians have compared him with great monarchs like Constantine, Marcus Aurelius, Alexander, Alfred the Great, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Akbar and Napoleon, but Asoka's achievements often stand head and shoulders above others. Asoka was a benevolent ruler. He looked upon his subjects as his children and did everything possible to promote their material and spiritual welfare of his Governance as a good administrator. Thus he upheld a new paternal concept of kingship and introduced a popular Governance of his empire. His humanitarian activities crossed the boundaries of his kingdom as a popular Governance and spread to other nations as well.*

*Asoka also included certain benevolent activities within his policy of Dhamma. Asoka aimed at relieving the distress of living being and in this regard he made no distinction between man and animal. Charitable dispensaries were established both for human beings and beasts. Besides, trees were planted on both sides of the roads for the benefit of man and creatures alike. These humanitarian measures were not only confined to the territories of the Maurya empire. In one his Rock-Edicts Asoka claimed that the measures were even extended to foreign countries.*

Emperor Asoka occupies a glorious place in world history. Historians have compared him with great monarchs like Constantine, Marcus Aurelius, Alexander, Alfred the Great, Julius Caesar, Charlemagne, Akbar and Napoleon, but Asoka's achievements often stand head and shoulders above others. The Mauryan Centralized monarchy became a paternal despotism under Asoka. He defined his attitude towards his subjects in unmistakable terms: 'All men are my children; and just as I desire for my children that they may obtain every kind of Welfare and happiness both in this and the next world, so I desire for all men, 'In two separate Rock edicts Asoka boldly states: 'Whatsoever I perceive (as good), that I wish, intending, I would fulfil (it) by action and achieved by definite means'. This could not have been the statement of a monarch if he was not conscious of his unfettered power.

Asoka took much interest in the exposition of the Buddhist Dharma or doctrine. The sight of misery & bloodshed in the Kalinga War (261 B.C.) turned the Emperor from the policy of military conquest (Digvijaya) to a policy of conquest of man's hearts by the law of piety (Dharma Vijaya) Romila Thapar comments that Asoka equated Dhamma with social responsibility, and general humaneness in all actions.

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A few years after taking over the reins of his empire, Asoka conquered Kalinga which was situated between the Subarnarekha in Bengal and the Godavari and covered parts of Orissa and Andhra. The 13th Rock Edit of Asoka gives a vivid account of the conquest of Kalinga after terrible was in which 1,50,000 persons were captured, 1,00,000 were slain and many times that number perished.<sup>1</sup>

In one of his edicts, Asoka tells - I was the head of a vast empire but I longed to subjugate a small Kingdom and cause the death of thousands of soldiers. I widowed thousands of women and orphaned thousands of children. "With these oppressive thoughts in his mind he could not stay there any longer. He led his army back towards Pataliputra with a heavy heart."<sup>2</sup>

According to Dr. Radhakumud Mukherjee the Kalinga war brought about far-reaching changes not only in Asoka's personal life but also in the internal and external policies of Magadha. If tradition is to be believed, Asoka was converted to Buddhism by the venerable monk Upagupta shortly after the Kalinga war.<sup>3</sup>

With Upagupta, the Emperor under took a pilgrimage beginning with the Lumbini Garden, the birth place of the Buddha in the Nepal. He then Lumbini Garden, the birth place of the Buddha in the Nepal. He then went out to Kapilavastu the place where the Buddha. Spent his childhood. Sarnath where he first preached & Sam Bodhi (Budhagaya) where he attained enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

The Kalinga War, in fact, brought about a change in him. This change reflected itself in the internal and external policies of Asoka No. - (1) He devoted himself to the Spiritual uplift of the people, (2) Asoka appointed Dhammamahamatra and other officials for the well being of the people, (3) Asoka gave up the

policy of conquest forever, (4) He sent missionaries abroad for propagating Buddhism, the religion of non violence. Asoka was attracted more by the ethical than the philosophical aspect of Buddhism and laid stress on the practical benevolent activities & pious thoughts.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that Asoka become a lay worshipper of Buddha, though the view that he actually joined the Sangha and became a monk may not have the support of evidence. He, however, made a deep study of the Buddhist scriptures & undertook tours to visit his people & instruct them in Dharma. He also took steps to maintain the monastic discipline and the integrity of the Sangha. A Buddhist council was convoked at Pataliputra during his reign to prevent schism in the Buddhist Church.<sup>6</sup>

According to Dr. Radhakumud Mukherjee, "in the annals of kingship, there is scarcely any record comparable to that of Asoka, both as a man and a ruler." "Though a devout Buddhist, Asoka followed the policy of religious toleration. According to Asoka the principles of morality were the: "essence of all religious."<sup>7</sup>

He did not uphold the main tenets of Buddhism like Nirvana, Aryasatya, 'Astangika Marga' or the Eightfold path, Dhamma and Sangha. For them he propagated some basic moral and ethical values. He told them to respect parents and fellow-humans, to be kind to the poor, slaves and servants, to abstain from Killing animals and to be tolerant towards other faiths. "He never became an enemy of the Devas & Brahmanas and granted liberal endowments to them as well as Ajivikas. His Dharma-Mahamatras were told to look after all sects including the Jainas."<sup>8</sup>

Asoka never Sought to impose his sectarian belief on others. "NIRVANA" could be attained by the people if they followed the ancient rule namely: a) reverence to parents & superiors; b) truthfulness; c) compassion towards animals. The law of piety has described in the second pillar edict as "little impiety, many good deeds, compassion, liberality, truthfulness and purity."<sup>9</sup>

Asoka practiced what he preached. He inculcated the virtues of compassion, liberality and toleration.<sup>10</sup>

Asoka gave up hunting & forbade the Slaughter of animals for the royal kitchen. He provided free medical aid both for men & animals.<sup>11</sup>

Asoka declare that "Sab Munishe Paja Mama" - All man my child & my ambition in giving prosperity to them. Romila Thapar told that "Asoka was not a visionary. Nor was he a prophet who had received special enlightenment, Buddhistic or otherwise ... Asoka's DHARMA, a part from being a superb

document of his essential humaneness was also an answer to the Socio-political needs of the contemporary situation."<sup>12</sup>

He introduced 'Dhammayatras' in place of 'Viharayatras' (pleasure tours) which meant visits to the holy spots associated with the Sacred memories of Buddha. He employed 'Dhammamahamatras' who were entrusted with the task of spreading the messages of Buddha among the people, bring harmony among various communities and work for the temporal and spiritual welfare of the subjects. He requisitioned the services of important officials like the 'Rajukas', 'Yutas', 'Purushas' and 'Pradeshikas' to bring the message of Dharma to the doors of all his subjects.<sup>13</sup> He got the teachings of Buddha and his own - Known as Dharmmalipis, - engraved on rocks and pillars so that everybody could read them.

Philanthropy was the key to his missionary activities. He planted trees, set up roadside resting places, dug wells and built hospitals for both people and animals. His welfare activities spread to foreign countries. He convened the third Buddhist council in Pataliputra in order to maintain the integrity of Buddhism and to keep the Buddhist Sangha united.

He sent emissaries too far away Keralputra, Satyaputra, Chola, Pandya countries in the South. His religious ambassador, Maharakshit, visited the five Greek rulers - Antiochus Theo's, of Syria, Antigonus Gonatus of Maccidonia, Alexander of corinth, Ptolemy Philadelphus of Egypt and Megas of Africa. The Asoka's policy of Dharma vijaya was crowned with complete success. "The reverberation of the War-drum" (bheri ghosha) became "the reverberation of the law" (Dharma ghosha). The emperor even called upon his sons & successors not to think of fresh conquest but to follow the policy of Ahimsa.<sup>14</sup>

Asoka claimed to have successfully launched 'Dharmmavijaya' in a Vast stretch of land. Historian Sanders says his ambassadors helped to create a cultural and spiritual impact on the superstitious nations in Europe, Asia & Africa. He says, "People perform various ceremonies on occasions of sickness, the weddings of sons and daughters the birth of children and departure on Journeys but such ceremonies bear little fruit but the observance of Dharmma bears great fruit but brings the desired end in this world, and even if it fails to attain the desired end in this world, it begets endless merit in the next world." H.G. Wells comments that, "Amidst the tens and thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, the name of Asoka shines and shines almost alone like a star."

## References

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