

Ashoka – A Retrospective

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Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty is today perceived as one of the greatest rulers of our history. But over the millennia he was perceived in various ways and a retrospective of his influence is almost a tour through the entire span of Indian history. Why was this extraordinary ruler seemingly ignored by some; why has he become so prominent in recent times? How has his influence permeated through different historical periods and how have his legacy and ideas been appropriated, by whom and in what form? Is it possible to draw ideas from him for our contemporary concerns without doing harm to the historical context?

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To speak of the king Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty in a retrospective vein is to race through virtually the entire span of Indian history. The question frequently asked is, why was this extraordinary ruler seemingly ignored in the past centuries and why has he become so prominent in recent times. Subsequent to his reign he is thought to have been gradually set aside. Only in recent times were his inscriptions deciphered providing evidence of his ideas and actions. Nevertheless, we have to ask whether these were actually ignored through much of Indian history or whether they were appropriated and if so, by whom, in what form and are we still appropriating them or ignoring them in any essential way?

Many modern assessments have tended to view him largely only as a Buddhist. When placed in a historical context in more recent times the man and his ideas come to be liberated from this single perspective. We need to see him both as a statesman in the context of inheriting and sustaining an empire in a particular historical period, and as a person with a strong commitment to changing society through what might be called the propagation of social ethics.

Empires of the ancient world are often thought to have operated through the violence of conquest and the persuasion of ideology, the latter often intended to bring about a relative cultural uniformity. The method of conquest and the resistance to it varied, requiring subsequent adjustments in systems of governing and in cultural expression. Ancient empires incorporated contiguous territories which allowed of some broad-based similarities within their boundaries. Nevertheless disparities persisted. This was unlike colonial empires conquered across the oceans. These required new cultural articulations but did not necessarily aim at cultural uniformity.

The variations within the Mauryan Empire were immense and continued into later times. Ecologies changed from region

to region, as did social forms and economies. The area was a subcontinent of multiple and diverse patterns of living, of languages and of forms of worship. This is apparent not only from textual sources but even more so from the excavation of sites of this period. The Mauryan system attempted to incorporate the diversity but the degrees of assimilation in the regions were not similar as is particularly evident from the diverse cultural patterns that emerged on the disintegration of the empire. How was this diversity to be welded into an empire?

The Ashokan edicts might be the best way of initiating a reassessment of the king and the nature of his policies. Most of the edicts are personal statements of how he saw himself as combining political sovereignty and governance with closeness to what have been regarded as heterodox views. They were heterodox vis-a-vis brahmanical orthodoxy but the larger number of his subjects would not have found them alien. His reading of political sovereignty, both the conquest of Jambudvīpa and the welfare of his *praja* (subjects),¹ did not contradict his perspective on required policies. The edicts, moving between the two, often take shape as a discourse on governance and ethics.

Ashoka had to explain his understanding of *dhamma* given the multiplicity of senses in which the term was being used. This ranged from the *dharma* of the *varnashrama dharma* in which the obligations of caste were pre-eminent, to the questioning of this by various Shramana sects such as the Buddhists and Jains. For Ashoka, *dhamma* was essentially a code of ethical behaviour and the benefits thereof. This had parallels with Buddhist teaching but the two are not equated in the public domain. Thus in the Greek and Aramaic renderings of his edicts he uses terms that have a context in these languages, and a meaning close to his definition of *dhamma*, as for example, *eusebeia* meaning virtue, in Greek.² He does not refer to it as the teachings of the Buddha. It would seem that he was attempting to universalise a code focused on social ethics and on the accommodation of diverse views. His *dhamma* did not derive from divine inspiration even if its observance promised heaven. It was

more in keeping with the ethic conditioned by the logic of given social situations.

His formulations of *dhamma* were intended to influence the conduct of categories of people in relation to each other, especially where they involved unequal relationships. There was a repeated emphasis on harmonious social relations and often, though not always, of categories described almost as opposite pairs, as for example, parents and children, kinsmen and friends, teachers and pupils, employers and employees, *brahmanas* and *shramanas*. The empire included a spectrum of societies where these categories were variously organised. The underlining of this social ethic was virtually the reversal of the other system, the *varnashramadharma*. Ashoka mentions neither *varna* nor *jati* nor does he refer to caste relations as important. More general values were also called up such as not injuring animals and humans, being forgiving, observing piety and adhering to the truth.

His advocating tolerance and non-violence as official policy made him an unusual ruler. However, there is a small but significant discrepancy in what he propagated and in a couple of policy actions. These suggest that ahimsa as his official policy had limits, determined by circumstances.

Tolerance among Sects

Hostility between the *pasandas*/sects – orthodox and heterodox – and dissident groups evolving into sects required that the social ethic had to highlight tolerance among these sects. Ashoka sought the advancement of the essentials of all sects and this according to him was only possible if each treated the other with respect.³ He states that in honouring the views of others one is honouring one's own sect. Yet this sits uncomfortably with his edict ordering the expulsion of dissident monks from Buddhist monasteries.⁴ Possibly for him there was a distinction between activities within the Buddhist Sangha, and the need to rule without ideological prejudices. Monastic disputes were to be expected as the institution of monasteries had almost become politics in miniature. Contentions over rules and authority could disturb the general equilibrium sought by governance. Nevertheless, his statement that all sects should be treated with equal respect was

an innovation both in politics and among religious groups. This strand of thought was not unfamiliar in later times among those sects that aspired to universalistic values. The popular, but somewhat ineffective, current definition of secularism in India – *sarva-dharma-samabhava* (equal respect for all religions) – suggests a distant parallel with the Ashokan idea and echoes some of its insufficiencies.

More striking in an imperial system was Ashoka's claim to forsaking war and violence. However, this had a caveat. If war was unavoidable then he hoped that the victorious would be satisfied with light punishments.⁵ Curiously however, the *atavikas* (forest-dwellers) were at the receiving end of a fierce threat by the king of being killed – without any ostensible reason. Did this result from the encroachment by the state into forests and the resistance to this by forest-dwellers? This of course has been a continuous activity in Indian history and still persists.

The choice of such an ethic privileging ahimsa and the idea of tolerance as mutual and equitable respect among competing groups may have also been influenced by the problems of governing a subcontinental territory. The inaudible dialogue between the edicts and the ideas that became the prescriptions of the *Arthashastra* suggests seeming similarities but significant differences. For Kautilya, political integration required conquest followed by a centralised administration. Proximity to this model was frequently resorted to in discussions on administration in Orientalist discourse but the severity of the centralisation proposed would have been difficult in practice. Far more investigation is needed to try and approximate the reality of administration in those times and its patterns varying according to region.

The edicts seem more sensitive to a flexible administration. This is demonstrated in his orders to his officers and in the functions of the *dhamma-mahamattas*, specially appointed officers more particularly concerned with the well-being of his subjects. Adjustments to local conditions in the patterns of governance were likely and I have suggested that administration was diversified.⁶ Whereas there was a relatively centralised administration in the Ganga plain with its epicentre in Magadha

at that time, this was somewhat different from the less centralised administration in other areas – Gandhara, Saurashtra, Kalinga and Karnataka. The forested regions probably experienced a minimal control provided the forest dwellers were forthcoming with their produce. Lack of cooperation from these forest dwellers may have been the reason for the dire threats from the king. At one level, *dhamma* may have been an attempt to provide a pivot in the form of a persuasive ethic.

These ideas differ from what we associate with ancient empires, where, for instance, the validation of imperial rule generally came from a deity or through claims to divinity. Ashoka's references to deities are more in passing. For example, the title of *devanampiya* (the beloved of the gods), which he used together with *raja*, had little resemblance to the more exaggerated titles of post-Mauryan times; or his claim that because of the widespread practice of *dhamma*, the *devas*, meaning either the gods or kings, were now mingling with the people, is a statement the meaning of which remains controversial.⁷ He refers to the sound of the drum heralding *dhamma* and displays of heavenly chariots, of elephants, balls of fire and celestial forms (*divyani rupani*)⁸ almost as an ancillary to spectacle and magic. In the Ashokan cosmos the gods are rather shadowy figures with uncertain roles, rather than being the omniscient ones who control the universe.

The distinction between his being persuaded of the Buddha's teaching with some attachment to the Sangha, and his perception of himself as a ruler with a distinct purpose, can be observed in references to him from later sources. These can perhaps be differentiated into three categories. The first is obviously Ashoka as the exemplary king of the Buddhist sources, as in the *Ashokavadana* of the northern Buddhist tradition or the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* of the Pali Theravada tradition. The second is the seeming disappearance of Ashoka in brahmanical texts, but which has been questioned in recent times. The last would be the few but significant associations with him, directly or indirectly, by later rulers in their inscriptions.

The decipherment of the *brahmi* script in the 19th century drawing on the

Ashokan inscriptions required identifying the author of these. The *Mahavamsa* of the mid-first millennium AD provided some initial clues to the identity and this, in turn, tended to colour the image of Ashoka. In the Theravada tradition he was not only a royal patron donating largesse but also initiating the proselytising of Buddhism. The later claim that the Mauryas were in origin a clan linked to the Shakyas was attractive to the authors of the Sri Lankan chronicles. The political advantage of associating the coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka with Mahinda, said to be the son of Ashoka, introduced an association with a pre-eminent ruler and from the clan of the Buddha. Underlying the narratives of conversion and miraculous happenings, sovereign authority remained the issue.

Much has been said about the spread of Buddhism being ensured by the missions of Ashoka. He instituted a body of *dhamma-mahamattas* concerned with the general welfare of his subjects. They were sent as emissaries of the king even to the *Yonas* (the Hellenistic world). But were they preaching Buddhism? Hellenistic sources are silent about such supposed missions. The only part of the then Hellenistic world where Buddhism had a presence was Gandhara and this was within Ashoka's empire. The spread of a religion requires more than just missionaries backed by royalty.

Spread of Buddhism

The really impressive spread of Buddhism dates to the post-Mauryan period when both stupas and patrons multiplied. These patrons were occasionally royalty but more frequently the laity – householders, small-scale landowners, artisans and traders, and monks and nuns. They gave of their skills and made donations as reflected in their votive inscriptions at Buddhist monuments. The emergence of many kingdoms and the importance of urban and rural householders (*gahapatis*) diversified patronage.⁹ Such backing from society was required for supporting the renouncers. Buddhist presence in new areas which some Buddhist authors attribute to the missions of the king, finds little corroboration in other sources.

The appropriation of Ashoka by the other major Buddhist tradition had taken

place in the early centuries AD in texts of the northern Buddhist tradition as for example, in the *Ashokavadana*.¹⁰ Less politically oriented than the Sri Lankan chronicles, these versions present the king as acting closely to the wishes of the elders of the Buddhist Sangha. Dramatic stories and miracles, the common currency of both Buddhist traditions, begin to reach a new high: the wicked *chanda-ashoka* is converted to the righteous *dharma-ashoka*; the miraculous overnight construction of 84,000 stupas for placing the relics of the Buddha – the distribution of the relics underlining Ashoka's sovereignty; or, the king donating his kingdom to the Sangha, which had to be retrieved by the ministers at the order of his grandson. Was this an attempt to reconcile the *chakkavatti* (universal king who sets rolling the wheel of law) with the *bodhisattva* (a person destined to attain enlightenment) as has been suggested?

Ashoka's own declaration of his closeness to Buddhism points to a gradual process. He refers to himself as an *upasaka* (follower); as approaching the Sangha (*sanghe upeti*); visiting the Bodhi-tree (*ayaya sambodhim*); and there is also a controversial reading of his travelling with the relics of the Buddha.¹¹ The *dhamma* is described as an ancient tradition (*porana pakiti*). Whether or not the authors of the various Buddhist texts knew about the edicts, they preferred to selectively embroider on the narratives of their own making.

The contemporary function of narratives underlining the requirements of the ideal king may have been intended to instruct the new patrons – the royalty of the Indo-Greeks, Shakas and Kushanas. In the *Milinda-panho*, a discussion between a Buddhist priest and the Indo-Greek king Menander, Ashoka is said to have witnessed an act of truth performed by a prostitute who was able to roll back the waters of the Ganga demonstrating the power of the teaching.¹²

That the Buddhist traditions had their own take on Ashoka is evident from the absence of their mentioning the Kalinga campaign as significant to the formulation of his understanding of *dhamma*. The king describes his remorse and repentance at the suffering caused by him in an edict¹³ located everywhere except, interestingly, in Kalinga. The two specific edicts inscribed

in Kalinga are addressed to his officers in the region.¹⁴ He orders them to ensure the welfare of the people, encouraging them to trust the king, as a child would its father – a trust needed after the campaign. If the monks had read the inscriptions they might have described the conversion as taking place on the battlefield as some historians have done in our time. But regret and repentance, recollected in tranquillity, is too tame for the drama of conversion.

It might also be worth asking what such a "conversion" could have entailed. Religious articulation was multiple, characterised by the presence of a variety of heterodox and orthodox sects, some strongly opposed, others less so. If the combination of the exercise of power and the practice of Buddhism was problematic, this seems not to have been the concern of Buddhist texts.

The transmission of information being largely oral, the stories from these texts would have entered the repertoire of folklore. Locations became associated in historical memory with Ashoka. Travel accounts of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, who came in the fourth, seventh and later centuries AD, narrate the stories more likely from the northern tradition. Fa Hsien attributes some of them to inscriptions from Magadha.¹⁵ Hsuan Tsang in the seventh century writes of vast numbers of stupas built by Ashoka located all over the subcontinent.¹⁶ Perhaps he was influenced by the story of the 84,000 stupas. He also refers to at least half a dozen stone pillars, largely in the Ganga heartland, each with different animal capitals. But he has less to say on the possible readings of inscriptions. Perhaps by now the script could not be read, because he mentions a stupa built by Ashoka in Kalinga but does not refer to the campaign. Whether built by Ashoka or not, the stupas are nevertheless attributed to him. Were they the symbols of a Buddhist king or had they become the historical legitimization of a site?

By this time, the tradition with its many legends had accompanied the spread of Buddhism to various parts of Asia. Ashoka emerged as the *cakravarti* of the Buddhist world beyond the subcontinent. But in India he received little mention. Yet even if he had been marginalised as a ruler, the question remains whether his ideas and attempts at

a particular form of governance were part of discussions on kingship and ethics.

In the eyes of Vedic Brahmanism and later Puranic Hinduism, Shramanic sects were heterodox – the *pasandas*/sects of the *nastikas* (those who did not believe in deities). The heretics were more successful in the competition for royal patronage in the immediate post-Mauryan times. This was doubtless resented by the orthodox. However, as the argument was made a few decades ago, there was little in the way of a brahmanic revival as a result of Shunga rule. The post-Mauryan period witnessed an efflorescence of Buddhism through an expansion in patronage within the subcontinent and beyond. Texts of brahmanical authorship did not name Ashoka as the object of their hostility but were opposed to the teaching of the Buddha which gave shape to some of the principles of the *dhamma*. Ashoka is ignored or reduced to a mere name in the dynastic lists of the *Puranas*. Mayamoha is the name used for the Buddha and for Mahavira in the *Puranas*, because they were deluded and they deliberately deluded others. The hostility seems to find expression in the changing meaning of the term *devanampriya*.¹⁷

This was taken as a title by a few kings but is particularly associated with Ashoka. The Sri Lankan chronicles are familiar with it and maintain that it was adopted by their king Tissa. Its precise connotation remained controversial with some grammarians stating that it was a term of contempt and others that it was an honorific. The meaning of *deva* varied from gods to kings to fools depending on the context. The *Mahabharata* has an ironic statement on a king called Ashoka, presumably the Mauryan: that among those celestials who were born on earth was the *mahasura* Ashva who became the raja Ashoka,¹⁸ described as *mahavirya parakrama*, a great conqueror. Many of the rajas so created are those who were hostile to the heroes. Recent research on the Shantiparvan and Udyogaparvan of the *Mahabharata* suggests that the dilemmas faced by Arjuna and Yudhishtira reflect some element of Buddhist thought and an echo of what might have been the debates that grew out of Ashoka's *dhamma*. More specifically the questioning of the kshatriya model might have been encouraged from the continuing presence of

some Ashokan ideas. Yudhishtira's initial rejection of rulership posed the tension between renouncer and householder, his wish being to opt for the former. The process of his being persuaded to renounce renunciation was often through arguments opposed to heterodox thinking.¹⁹

The discussion on kingship in the *rajadharma* section tends to focus on the king rather than the institutions of the state. The earlier Buddhist experience seems to have toyed with appropriating the legitimacy of the ruler as a way of ensuring closeness to power. This may have been thought necessary if the institution of kingship was to be part of brahmanical enterprise. With the emergence of state systems the nature of kingship had changed. From another perspective, and assuming that the *rajadharma* section is post-Mauryan in date, as is now being suggested, it could be argued that although there was an awareness of Kautilya's reference to *saptanga* (the seven constituents of the state), the function of these in the Ashokan state was not the same as envisaged in the *Arthashastra*.

Definitions of the Social Code

A central point of debate is likely to have been around the definitions of the social code. The *varna-ashrama-dharma* of the normative texts was not universally accepted. The values of the *kshatriya dharma* highlighting war, where necessary, violated the ethic of ahimsa. But as a *kshatriya* it was Arjuna's *svadharma* to go to war. Arjuna's dilemma also revolves around the legitimacy of violence against kinsmen, an appropriate concern for a clan society on the eve of fading out. The insertion of the *Bhagvad-Gita* would have been necessary to counter the questioning of the morality of violence and to argue that violence was justified where it involved the destruction of evil. To this was added the notion that death is not death since the soul is immortal. This was problematic for those that denied the soul.

The *Gita* can perhaps be read at one level as a response to the polemic of interweaving ahimsa with politics. This would have to have been faced frontally if there continued to be a memory of Ashoka having explored the relationship between kingship and *dhamma*. From later inscriptions we know

that the Mauryas had not been forgotten. Probably some may still have read the edicts.

Yudhishtira's pronouncements against violence speak of the evils of war, possibly reflecting a debate among post-Ashokan polities. His remorse and rejection of violence is reminiscent of Ashoka's Major Rock Edict XIII relating to the Kalinga campaign. Yudhishtira states that no *dharma* is as sinful as the *kshatriya dharma* because a king during a campaign slaughters a multitude of people – *raja hanti mahajanam*.²⁰ Others justify war by the more usual argument that it removes evil without explaining how evil is to be differentiated from good, apart from referring to the normative code.

The *gana-sanghas* (chiefdoms) of the middle Ganga plain appear to have been incorporated into the Empire. This process would have meant that some coercion was inevitable but persuasion was a preferred way. Subsequently, when the Mauryan empire disintegrated new kingdoms emerged. The restitution of old polities, to whatever extent, and the creation of new ones inevitably involved violence. So although the players on the epic stage were heroes of past times, some of the quandaries they faced remained relevant to their contemporary times.

An example of the marginalisation of the memory of Ashoka in a brahmanical ambience, subsequent to the seventh century AD, is captured in the reuse of an Ashokan object. The stone *pitha* of the image in a temple (*Chandralamba*) at the site of Sannathi in Karnataka was discovered to be a slab with an engraving of Ashokan edicts that included the Separate Edicts.²¹ A section in the centre was cut out to hold the tenon at the base of the image. Did the *brahmana* literati not want to know what had been engraved so carefully on the slab? Did they assume it was a religious invocation but nevertheless cut into it? Or was it a deliberate act of contempt? Why the Separate Edicts were engraved at Sannathi remains an enigma since there is no reference to a local campaign.

A rather different mood emerges from Kalhana writing the *Rajatarangini* in the 11th century and referring to Ashoka's activities in Kashmir.²² He is said to have ruled over the entire earth, was a follower of the Jinashasana, built stupas at specifically

mentioned places and established the wealthy town of Shrinagara. He restored a Shaiva temple and the deity granted him a son, Jalauka, who ousted the *mleccha* (one who is outside the social pale) from the country. The narrative, although it does not repeat the Buddhist accounts, is nevertheless approving of the king. It reflects an attempt to reconstruct the past from local records and traditions. Significantly, Ashoka is mentioned by name and represented as a monarch of considerable standing. Kalhana was intellectually many cuts above the authors of the *Puranas*, and his perspective is refreshingly different.

But this also raises the question of whether Ashoka, ignored in Gupta times and soon after, was restored to some respect by the 11th century. Perhaps one may be permitted to speculate. The earlier period had seen confrontations between Puranic Hinduism and the Shramanic religions at various levels, from differences in philosophical explanations to competition for patronage. *Brahmana* authorship had by now acquired the mechanism of legitimising royalty through reconstructing genealogies and validating the creation of new castes of *kshatriyas* as stated in the *Puranas*,²³ and by claiming various other powers. Their authority was enhanced with grants of land from royalty. To this was added the incorporation of various forms of religious articulation. Sanskrit, the language of the elite and the learned, replaced Prakrit in the royal courts. With their success being confirmed it would have been possible for this authorship to make concessions to what had earlier been denied.

The third category of sources undermined the first two. This consisted of persons that either referred directly to Ashoka or that used Ashokan objects to derive historical legitimation. Ashoka was mentioned in inscriptions other than his own, and his pillars were reused, perhaps for historical legitimacy.

An early inscriptional reference to him comes from a Buddhist stupa at Kanaganahalli near Sannathi in Karnataka.²⁴ Two low-relief panels carry label inscriptions identifying the person represented as, *raya asoko*. One shows a royal personage accompanied by some women and the other depicts worship at a shrine. These seem not to be portraits with identical

facial features but conventional representations. Ashoka is treated on par with contemporary Satavahana rulers also called *raya/rayo*. He is not given the title that he took in his own inscriptions. The form *raya* occurs in his edicts but generally as part of the longer title. On one occasion he calls himself *laja magadhe* when addressing the Sangha (the replacement of “r” by “l” being a characteristic of Magadhan Prakrit).²⁵ Ashoka having ruled a century or two prior to this, the labels suggest that popular narratives about him were in circulation and he was a known king. Nevertheless he is given no exalted title.

A tangential echo of Ashoka comes from the post-Mauryan inscription of Kharavela from Orissa.²⁶ He mentions calling a council of Jaina monks of diverse views to help sort the teaching. He also refers to his respect for all sects – *sava pasanda pujako*.

An official record of at least one activity of Ashoka’s administration is available from post-Mauryan times. Rudradaman’s inscription at Girnar of AD 150 records the building of a dam at the Sudarshana lake in Saurashtra by a governor of Chandragupta Maurya.²⁷ It was subsequently repaired because of heavy damage from a storm by the governor of Ashoka and yet again later by the governor of Rudradaman. A still later fifth century inscription records its repair once more during the reign of Skandagupta – a neat continuity from the Mauryas to the Guptas.²⁸ Significantly, the inscriptions are on the same rock as the earlier Ashokan edicts and this seems to have been deliberate, resulting in an impressive historical record.

The pillars of Ashoka received greater attention. There are traces of some imitation in Gupta times. However, among the reuse of objects the most challenging is the reinscribing and reinstalling of Ashokan pillars. The best known is the one moved to the fort at Allahabad. Among its various inscriptions are the Pillar Edicts, the *prashasti* of Samudragupta and a genealogy of Jahangir, each inscription from a different millennium and in a different language.²⁹ Could Samudragupta’s engraver have read the earlier inscriptions? The scripts were not unrelated but not identical.

The meaning that might have been attached to the pillars becomes more problematic in later times. The engraving of

medieval period inscriptions on some Ashokan pillars or segments can be noticed from the 12th century onwards.³⁰ These are not tourist graffiti. They are statements from the likes of the Chauhans and Feroz Shah Tughlaq, and a few others. These pillars were also moved from their original locations some of which had become derelict, to places of importance. As late as the 16th century they carry brief inscriptions of goldsmiths who were the traditional engravers. The Lauriya-Nandangarh pillar carries a Persian inscription of Aurangzeb.³¹ Perhaps, the fashion began with bringing the iron pillar to Mehrauli (near present day Delhi).

What did these later rulers make of the pillars? We know that the earlier inscriptions could not now be read. Surely, the attraction of the pillars was not just the shine of the polished stone that led to their being hauled over long distances. The pillars were special but were not worshipped although some thought they were talismans. They were not associated with any event although some linked them, predictably, to the Pandavas. The pillars were not trophies of victory easy to carry home. They evidently evoked a historical legitimacy that later rulers were anxious to inherit. Can one, in a somewhat contrary fashion, suggest that perhaps they encapsulated a subterranean memory, waiting to be mined by historians?

Ashoka in Our Times

And so we come to the rediscovery of Ashoka in our times. It began with the decipherment of the *brahmi* script in the 19th century using the Ashokan inscriptions as texts. The clues from the Sri Lankan chronicles were confirmed by the reading of some of his inscriptions discovered some decades later. The debates began on the historical assessment of Ashoka Maurya at the start of the 20th century. And inevitably the modern context impinged on the past and the past in turn gave shape to aspects of the present.

Monographs of Early 20th Century

A series of monographs were published by historians on the reign of the king during the early half of the 20th century – Vincent Smith, H C Raychaudhuri, DR Bhandarkar, B M Barua, Nilakantha Sastri and others.³² Writing on Ashoka became almost a rite of

passage for historians of ancient India. Vincent Smith's assessments of early kings were peppered with references to autocracy and despotism as was common to many colonial historians. In his more positive descriptions there was the caveat of "after the Oriental manner".³³ He subscribed to the tendency among some Orientalists of giving preference to religious textual sources without questioning them too closely. For him Ashoka was "a masterful autocrat ruling church and state alike with a strong hand" but at the same time intermittently a monk and something of a missionary.³⁴ These were, in a sense, contradictory statements and in any case did not hold for long since there was little evidence to support them. Being a classicist of the 19th century he asserted the superiority of the Greco-Roman civilisation which, in turn, endorsed the current imperial perspective.

Other contemporary historians had other views. Some of these emanated from concerns of nationalism and some from a claim to a wider spectrum of causes. Vincent Smith was appreciated for gathering data but his judgments on Ashoka were rightly set aside. A common argument now was that Ashoka had weakened the defences of India by annulling the military strength of imperial Magadha through his endorsement of non-violence. His emphasis on ahimsa opened India to invasions from the north-west. The fabric of power constructed by Chandragupta and Chanakya was allowed to collapse. The treasury was crippled by donations to religious institutions. For B M Barua, Ashoka was to Buddhism what St Paul was to Christianity.

Readings went in diverse ways. Some read the edicts through the lens of Buddhist texts without questioning the reasons for the Buddhist reconstructions of his reign. Others followed the prevalent view that all religions in pre-Islamic India were tangential variants of Hinduism and there was little fundamental difference between Buddhism and Hinduism. Therefore, the *dharmma* of Ashoka was in essence Hindu. The argument of Emile Durkheim, who found it problematic to define Buddhism as a religion for various reasons, such as the absence of deities, found no place in this discussion.³⁵ From the mid-20th century the historical treatment of Ashoka began to change. Further studies of Mauryan period sites

provided archaeological information additional to the texts. Historical explanations now included attempts to relate the king more closely to his historical context.³⁶

The conventional image of great emperors was that they were mighty conquerors. The Mauryan inscriptions demarcated a territory covering a major part of the sub-continent. This was the closest that an earlier state had come to the boundaries of British India which was regarded as the territorial foundation of the coming Indian nation. Ashoka was accused of allowing this territory to disintegrate. This was to develop into a slogan that Buddhism had emaciated Hinduism. However, running counter to this, there was also an admiration for what was regarded as his extraordinary vision in endorsing ahimsa and the tolerance that arose from an equal respect for all religions. This was seen as an essential feature of Hindu civilisation.

Perspectives of Nationalism

These perspectives – the territory that had to be defended against foreign invasion and the endorsement of a policy of non-violence – spoke to the concerns of nationalism. To this was added the acceptance of the coexistence of diverse views, at least in theory. Among the national leaders of the time Gandhi drew on Ashoka less as a historical figure and more perhaps as an inspiration for his own methods to achieve freedom from colonial rule. Yet the *Gita*, not exactly endorsing Ashoka's *dharmma*, was for Gandhi the axial text. Was it because it speaks of a just war and fighting colonialism was a just war? A few of the issues raised by Ashoka seemed to tie

in with Gandhi's way of conducting his rather unusual anti-colonial campaign with its emphasis on ahimsa and the coexistence of diverse ideas.

Nehru was attracted to the rejection of violence in a civilised polity, to the plea that all sects should live in harmony despite differences and to the propagation of a social ethic for governance that did not require adherence to a particular religion or deity.³⁷ These were values pertinent to current political problems in India with the rising swell of communal ideologies, the shrill insistence of equating Indian with Hindu or the demand for a separate Islamic nation state. But the kind of values referred to by Ashoka have not been converted into effective action, although they continue to be a source for discussion. Propagating values is not in itself sufficient to change society.

The thought that the words of Ashoka need to be heard again is problematic. Giving him a voice relevant to the present would in effect be a voice-over. Historical figures are best understood as persons in their own historical context. Nevertheless it seems to me that there are some ideas implicit in the edicts that could resonate with contemporary times. (And here comes my voice-over!) I mention them not because I think Ashoka should be an exemplar for our times, but rather that in a comparison of the historical context of ideas they might provide another dimension to our analysis of the present.

The need for each sect to give space to and honour the others is a sentiment that is proclaimed in our times, even if not observed, especially in societies where religious factionalism has taken political



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forms and given direction to nationalism. But equal respect, even in theory, has limitations if there are no equal rights and equal obligations.

The social ethic as described in the edicts was meant to apply to any community or society. Its concern with fostering human relationships, irrespective of belief systems and social status, contained the seminal ideas that could have pointed modern Indian society in what we today would call a more “secular” direction. Such a society could be facilitated by recognising antecedents where communities have been sympathetic to these values. This would require a rethinking of what we like to call the “Indian tradition”.

Another idea that has had some currency drew on the notion that the renouncer’s authority could be used as a challenge to political power. The duality of the world-renouncer and the world-conqueror, suggested by what is said to have been the pronouncement at the birth of the Buddha, has been examined at length in a study of Ashoka and later Buddhist polities.³⁸ Was Ashoka attempting to draw on this parallel power by propounding an ethic that had universal application and grew out of an association with renouncers? Gandhi was not unaware of the potential of this idea however differently he may have used it.

The edicts were written in Prakrit, which at that time constituted a Prakrit cosmopolis, if I may borrow the term, the language that transcended political boundaries and most religious affiliations.³⁹ The linguistic variants in the inscriptions point to an impressive linguistic reach with the potential of large numbers of people becoming familiar with the ethic. The gods to be worshipped and the relationships among people were not invariably dictated by religious authority. This became a significant articulation of religion among many Indians, in particular among the substratum religions, as one might call them, that created their own codes and deities. They may not have been politically powerful since they were treated as “the Other” by those in authority but they were the ones that shaped the genesis of multiple cultures outside the mainstream. In a sense the *dhamma* of Ashoka was at least aware of the presence of “the Other” and the need for its inclusion. The turning to

Buddhism by a few million of the socio-economic substratum in the mid-20th century may have had some historical echoes.

The Last Edict

In his last edict, the Seventh Pillar Edict, Ashoka states that *dhamma* has advanced among people through two ways, through codes and rules or legislation (*niyama*) and through conviction and persuasion (*nijjhatti*).⁴⁰ Significantly, he did not mention the coercion of conquest as most other kings would have done. He adds that legislating behaviour has been less effective as compared to persuasion. His belief in the effectiveness of his policies may have been in part wishful thinking. All the same, for a king of early times this is a remarkable statement. Its poignancy lies in its coming in the last of his edicts, a retrospective on his reign. We today can claim to be inheritors of his ideas only when our ideas and actions draw strength, not just from rules and legislation, but preferably from persuasion. We have a long way to go.

NOTES

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- 26 Hathigumpha Cave Inscription of Kharavela, *Epigraphia Indica*, XX, 72 ff.
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