

AN ANALYTICAL STUDY ON EMPERORS ASOKA, KANISHKA AND HARSHA

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ABSTRACT

Among the many kings who extended their patronage to Buddhism, the most prominent are Asoka, Kaniska and Harsha. Asoka was the person that made Buddhism a world religion. It was during his time well known nine missions were sent to various countries. Many inscriptions to impart the knowledge of morals were erected everywhere in his kingdom. After Ashoka a Kushana king called Kaniska supported Sarvastivada School, although it was during his times that the first Mahayana Sutras marked their appearance. King Harsha Wardhana was also a great patron of Buddhism in India.

Asoka (268-232) is mentioned by historians as 'the greatest of kings', 'not because of the physical extent of his empire, extensive as it was, but because of his character as a man, the ideals for which he stood and the principals by which he governed. Whatever religion Asoka believed in before his deeply moving experience of Kalinga war, he had converted himself to Buddhism at the time of third council. His conversion to Buddhism is compared by Rhys Davids with the Roman Emperor Constantine's to Christianity.¹ His pilgrimages to the Buddhist sites were followed by erection of pillars with inscriptions that record the historical significance of those places.

Kaniska ruled from 78 A. D to 101 or 102 A. D. His capitol was Purushapura (modern Peshawar) had a vast empire extending from Bihar in the east to Khorasan in the West and from Khotan in the north to the Konkan in the south. He accepted Buddhism as his religion and built many monasteries and stupas that were seen and admired by itinerant monks from China.

Harsha Wardhana, ascended to throne in the seventh century when he was 16 years old under tragic circumstances and ruled for over forty years from 606 to 647 A. D. He changed his capital from Thaneswar to Kanauj after capturing it for political and administrative reasons. The young Buddhist prince managed to become a powerful ruler of a vast stretch of Land in India. He was very powerful yet well known for his kindness and wisdom. He was a strong believer in the Bodhisatva Avalokitesvara. As Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang described he was an energetic ruler.

I hope to view service regarding the kings of Asoka, Kanishka and Harsha. There are kings had been big servicing procure developed the Buddhism. As a result of pervade had Buddhism in to the Asian Countries. Because I think this research will important all philosophers.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism, Asoka Inscriptions, Mahawamsa & Buddhist Scripture

INTRODUCTION

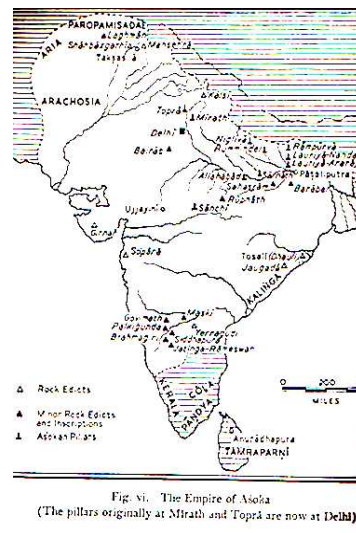
Among the many kings who extended their patronage to Buddhism, the most prominent are Asoka, Kaniska and Harsha. Asoka was the person that made Buddhism a world religion. It was during his time well known nine missions were sent to various countries. Many inscriptions to impart the knowledge of morals were erected everywhere in his kingdom.

¹ Rhys Davids *Buddhist India* p.298

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Emperor Asoka

Asoka (c.(273?) 268-232 B. C) is mentioned by historians as 'the greatest of kings', 'not because of the physical extent of his empire, extensive as it was, but because of his character as a man, the ideals for which he stood and the principals by which he governed.' His towering personality shines through the original personal records he has left engraved on rocks and stone pillars. He has left 14 rock edicts, seven pillar edicts, thirteen minor rock edicts and many other inscriptions of miscellaneous character engraved on rocks, pillars and walls of caves. Unfortunately these edicts do not provide any data in relation to his early life and therefore we have to depend solely on Buddhist traditions. They portray his early life, most probably highly exaggerated, as a ruthless slayer of 99 brothers in order to become the emperor. It is said that he did this fratricidal crime being foretold of his coming into the throne by his Ajivika family priest named Janasana.² However, Ashoka has expressed great solicitude for the families of his brothers in the records engraved long after his accession to the throne.³



He expanded the Maurya Empire he inherited from his ancestors by carrying out fierce wars against who had managed to stay independent in spite of the power of the empire. But the well known Kalinga conquest made him change his attitude to conquering lands. The 13th rock edict of Asoka gives a vivid account of the conquest of Kalinga. In consequence to the disastrous invasion 150,000 persons were captured, 100,000 were slain, and many times that number perished. After the war he genuinely regretted the massive genocide and other catastrophes he caused because of his power hunger. His personality underwent a radical change which made him drop *Dig-Vijaya* for ever and initiate a course *Dhamma-Vijaya*. He was nominally converted to Buddhism in the seventh year of his reign but during the first two and half years he was not particularly pious. It was in his eighth regnal year he engaged in Kalinga conquest. However, after his shocking experience of repercussions of the conquest he devoted his time to study Buddhism and became a learned lay follower who could even plan an anthology of Buddhist Sutras for monks to study. He has declared 'All what the Buddha has said is true and meaningful.' In another important statement Asoka claims that he considered all human beings as his

² According to Divyavadana p.369 Pingalavatsa.

³ H. Kern has said ashoka was 'half moiter and half idiot.' as quoted by Basham. p.57

children. It was Asoka, for first time in the history, introduced a practice called 'round the clock service and communication'. (*savamkalamathakamampativedanava*)

He was impressed by the concepts of non-violence and love in Buddhism. From that time he devoted the rest of his life for promoting Buddhist religion in which he found solace and comfort he commenced a series of pious tours all over the country spreading the message of Buddhism. He visited important Buddhist sites and erected commemorative pillars with inscriptions that described the significance of the places. He also instituted some high officers to proceed on circuit every five years and in addition to their normal duties to engage in spreading Dhamma. He instituted a special class of officers called 'Dharma Mahamatras whose sole responsibility was establishing people in Dhamma.

He was the sponsor of the third council and assisted MoggaliputtaTissa to purify the Order. He announced that those who try to introduce disharmony among the Sangha will be properly dealt with (Minor pillar edict, Saranath). He is reported to have built 84000 stupas. P. T. Borale thinks this actually was a model village project which had a shrine around which the community was centred. His edicts encourage people to live good moral lives and wish for heaven. He has described good deeds he has involved in and his expectation that his sons and grand children to carry out them in future too.

According to the Mahawamsa he send missionaries to Kashmir and Gandhara, Mahisa Mandala (Mysore) Yavana (Greek settlements in North Western frontier province, Vanavasa (North Kanara), Aparantaka (Alor, Broach and Sopara), Maharattha (Maharashtra), Himavanta (Himalayan country), Tambapanni (Sri Lanka), Suvannabhumi (Burma and Thailand). The reliquaries unearthed at Bhilsa Topes bear the names of some of the missionaries. According the inscriptions he sent his Dharma Mahamatras to Antiochus, King of Syria, and the kingdoms of four other kings i.e., Ptolamy (Turamaya) of Egypt, Antigonus (Antakini) of Macedonea, Alexander (Alikasudara) of Epirus (in Northern Greece), and Magas of Cyrene (in North Africa). (Rock Edict XIII) He also mentions of the names of Yavanas, Kambojas, Pandiyans, Cholas, Andhras, Pulindas, Tambapannis.

He managed to convince everyone in the palace that killing animals for eating meat was bad and stop all killings in the royal kitchen. He made plants to be grown for shelter and for food and medicine. Roads were developed having shades of trees and wells dug at reasonable intervals to provide water for both men and animals. Hospitals and dispensaries were established to treat men and animals. (*manusacikicapasucikica*).

He was a tolerant king who did not persecute other faiths although he became an ardent follower of Buddhism. He even built dwelling places and offered donations to the clergy of other faiths. But he had to ban killing animals for religious rituals as he practised kindness to animals

Asoka ruled for about 40 years (Some suggest that it was 32 or 36 years.) and died in 232 B. C...⁴

Ashoka's tolerance of other religions and positive support extended to all religions has made some historians suspicious of the claims that he was a good Buddhist. While accpordingstrong support to Buddhism he dedicated artificial caves to Ajivikas. This, in fact, is only an indication of his torent spirit which is a quality of an exemplary Buddhist. The Buddha himself had insisted that certain rich and powerful followers of other religions should keep on economically supporting religious men of their previous faiths.

⁴ Akira Hirakawa, A History of Indian Buddhism (1993 Delhi) Chapter seven

Asoka's Grandfather, Chandragupta, according to Jaina sources, was a follower of Jainism and abdicated to join Jain Order towards the end of his life. He reportedly fasted to death to achieve liberation the Jaina way.⁵ Yet it should not mean that Asoka was a Jain even though he believed in and practised Ahimsa. His Ahimsa does not match the Jain extreme of Ahimsa. In his royal kitchen, until he stopped animal slaughter by gradual reduction, animals were killed for food and he was not extreme pacifist as Jains would expect. The wild tribesmen of hill and forest were a constant source of danger to the more settled parts of the empire, and it would seem that earlier kings had kept them in check by ruthless campaigns of extermination. Asoka clearly intended to civilize them, but it is quite evident that he was ready to repress them by force if they continued their raids on the more settled parts of his empire. He did not abolish death penalty even though he is said to have abolished judicial torture.⁶ So he could not be a Jain.

Ashoka could not be taken to be a Hindu since he publicly abolished animal slaughter even for religious purposes. Mahavamsa reports that even though his parents were used to offer alms to Brahmins, Asoka was not happy with their noisy, greedy and uncultured behaviour at the refectory.⁷ His inscriptions do not display any indication of his knowledge of Hinduism. Instead he shows such eminence in Buddhist scripture that he has made a reading list from the Buddhist scripture for Buddhist monks. It is an approved practice for Buddhist kings to commit for the purity of the teaching and the Sangha. Ashoka actively participated in unifying the Sangha and after that instructed his officers to ensure that all illbehaved Buddhist monks to be unfrocked. Buddhist records of the third council are very clear in the role the king played in and after the council.

Even though he does not mention nibbana as a goal in his inscriptions, his claim that everything that the Buddha said is well said is sufficient evidence that he was a Buddhist. Sigalovadasutta, in fact, indicates that the immediate goal possible for layman is sagga (heaven), not nibbana. Asoka had a strong belief in gods that he has said that as a result of growth of morality through his reforms, the gods had come to mix with people.⁸

Writes B. M. Barua: "The Maurya Emperor welcomed the lofty teachings of the Buddha and openly accepted the Saddhamma as his religion as a matter of choice, out of his profound conviction as to its intrinsic merit, rather because its underlying spirit was found accidentally to be in harmony with his own perception as to the nature of human good and his original vision as to the nature and course of human progress. He raised Buddhism from the position of a local faith to the status of a world religion."⁹

Whatever religion Asoka believed in before his deeply moving experience of Kalinga war, he had converted himself to Buddhism at the time of third council. His conversion to Buddhism is compared by Rhys Davids with the Roman Emperor Constantine's to Christianity.¹⁰ His pilgrimages to the Buddhist sites were followed by erection of pillars with inscriptions that record the historical significance of those places.

Kaniska

⁵ Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* p.51-53 Some sources maintain that Asoka became a Buddhist monk towards the end of his life.

⁶ Ibid, p.55

⁷ Mahavamsa V.35

⁸ Rock edict No.4

⁹ Barua, B. M., *Ashoka* pp.249-50

¹⁰ Rhys Davids *Buddhist India* p.298

Kaniska ruled from 78 A. D to 101 or 102 A. D. His capitol was Purushapura (modern Peshawar) had a vast empire extending from Bihar in the east to Khorasan in the West and from Khotan in the north to the Konkan in the south.

He accepted Buddhism as his religion and built many monasteries and stupas that were seen and admired by itinerant monks from China. (Fa-Hsien, Tsung Yun [A. D.518], HsuegTsant [A. D.630] describe them)



His major contribution to the course of Buddhism was sponsoring of the Fourth Buddhist Council. There are conflicting reports on the way it was conducted but it appears that the council was dominated by Sarvastivada monks as the king himself was a benefactor of Sarvastivada Buddhism. The Tripitaka agreed upon after the council was engraved on copper plates and deposited in stone boxes and a stupa was erected enshrining them.

The stupa he erected at Sha-Ji-Ki-Dheri is found in ruins and the relic casket was unearthed by archaeologists. It has a Buddha image attended by two deities either side. The reliquary has inscription which mentions Kaniska's name twice and even the name of the chief mason Agisala. As a matter of fact that there is a theory that the first ever Buddha image of the Gandhara tradition was made during his times and, the king, perhaps, encouraged it. His coins also depict the Buddha image and even have the word "**Boddo**" carved on it.



Many inscriptions and archaeological findings show us that during Kaniska's times Buddhism was in a flourishing condition. Kaniska patronised Buddhist scholars and inspired them in their literary activities. Parshva, Vasumitra, Asvaghosa, Sangharaksha, Dharmatrata, Ghosaka, and Buddhadeva are some of the eminent scholars who were engaged in Buddhist literary activities.

Harshawardhana (Harsha)

He ascended to throne in the seventh century when he was 16 years old under tragic circumstances and ruled for over forty years from 606 to 647 A. D. He changed his capital from Thanesar to Kanauj after capturing it for political and administrative reasons. The young Buddhist prince managed to become a powerful ruler of a vast stretch of Land in India.

He was very powerful yet well known for his kindness and wisdom. He was a strong believer in the Bodhisatva Avalokitesvara. As Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang described he was an energetic ruler.

Some sources say that, at first, he was a devotee of Siva Paramesvara and then became a Buddhist. But in Madhuban inscription his brother, Rajyasriwardhana, is described as a 'most devout worshipper of Sugata' (a Buddhist) and therefore we may rightly consider the same is true about Harsha too. He tolerated other religions and extended his support for their prosperity. Hiuen Tsang describes him stating "He governed everywhere in peace. He then practised to the utmost the rules of temperance (temperate restrictions), and sought to plant the tree of religious merit to such an extent that he forgot to sleep or eat. He forbade the slaughter of any living being or flesh as food throughout the Five Indies on pain of death without pardon. "He erected many 100 feet tall stupas, and in all highways of the towns and villages throughout India he erected hospices (*Punyasalas*, free lodging houses), provided with food and drink. There he stationed physicians with medicines for travellers and poor persons round about. It is recorded that the king organised a large conference of all religions where Hiuen Tsang showed the superiority of Mahayana Buddhism to all who assembled there. In addition to that every five years he held great assembly called Moksha.

Flattering in every Hiuen Tsang, who lived 14 years in India during the reign of Harsha, describes the condition of Buddhism under him as the zenith of glory. According to him there were about 100,000 monks within his extremely prosperous empire. He wrote: "Trade was brisk and people lived well. The government is honestly administrated, the criminal class is small, and the people live together in good terms, and are of pure moral principles. They do not practise deceit, keep their obligations, and do not take anything wrongfully." According to C. V. Vaidya "The reign of Harsha was brilliant ending to the period that was passing; like a flame that bursts into brilliance before it expires, the condition of the country in the days of Harsha was flattering in every respect"

CONCLUSIONS

This research topic is Analytical Study on Emperors Asoka, Kanishka and Harsha. Whatever religion Asoka believed in before his deeply moving experience of Kalinga war, he had converted himself to Buddhism at the time of third council. His conversion to Buddhism is compared by Rhys Davids with the Roman Emperor Constantine's to Christianity.¹¹ His pilgrimages to the Buddhist sites were followed by erection of pillars with inscriptions that record the historical significance of those places.

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¹¹ Rhys Davids *Buddhist India* p.298

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