AŚOKA'S EDICTS AND INDIAN TRADITION

Aśoka's edicts and their contents are familiar to all students of ancient Indian history. It has often been postulated by some eminent scholars that Aśoka's edicts were considerably influenced by Persian and Greek practices, that the preamble of Aśoka's edicts reflects an Achaemenian formula and that the animals represented on and resemblance with Aśoka's edicts is mainly formal and super-
—devānāṁpya piyoddhērājā—suggest Greek influence.

An attempt is made here to indicate that such foreign influence on and resemblance with Aśoka's edicts is mainly formal and superficial and that Aśoka's dharma ideal, as expressed through his edicts, chiefly brings into sharp focus the deep-rooted indigenous tradition traceable since the pre-Aśokan times up to the present day. There is remarkable continuity throughout Indian history of that sublime ideal which forms the very core of the cultural heritage of India.

Aśoka and Darius

In spirit and contents the Aśokan edicts are different from the Achaemenian columns in every detail. While Dariu's cuneiform inscriptions describe his proud imperial attitude, Aśoka's Brāhmī and Kharoṣṭhī inscriptions reflect his humanitarian mission. The Behistun inscription, for instance, reads: "Says Darius the king: Then that Phraortes with the horsemen who were faithful to him, fled from thence to the district of Media, named Rhages. Subsequently I despatched forces (in pursuit) by whom Phraortes was taken and brought before me. I cut off both his nose and his ears... He was held chained at my door; all the kingdom beheld him... And the chief men who were the followers at Ecbatana, within the citadel I imprisoned them". In contrast with these dreadful narration by Darius intoxicated with victory, Aśoka's XIII RE of Kalinga humbly records in the context of the Kalinga war—his first and last war—he waged and won: "If a hundredth, nay, a thousandth part of the persons who were then slain, carried away captive or done

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1 Cf. Zimmer, Art of Indian Asia, I, pp. 5, 23; Sen, Asoka's Edicts, pp. 5, 9, 10, 12, 40; Wheeler, Early India and Pakistan chapter IX.

2 Rawlinson, Persian Cuneiform Inscription at Behistun deciphered and translated with Memoir on Persian Cuneiform Inscriptions in General and on that of Behistun in particular, p. 224.
to death, were now to suffer the same fate, it would be a matter of remorse to His Majesty". Renouncing war forever, he declares that "The conquest of the Law of Piety alone is conquest of delight, and that from now on he intends to substitute the 'Drum of the Law of Piety' for the 'Drum of War' throughout the land. The VI RE of Girnar also states: "I consider it my duty (to promote) the welfare of all men". Even the officers called lájukas were appointed by Aśoka to "bestow welfare and happiness on the people of the country". In fact Aśoka maintained that "no duty is more important than (promoting) the welfare of all men". While the Kandahar inscription refers to "ten years expiation", RE XIII states, "that even a person who wrongs... must be forgiven for wrongs that can be forgiven". "Whatever effort" says Aśoka elsewhere, "I am making (is made) in order that I may discharge the debt (which I owe) to living beings, (that) I may make them happy in this (world), and (that) they may attain heaven in the other (world)"

Apart from the humane ideal expressed in his edicts in contrast with that of the Achaemenian ruler, Aśoka's title too is very modest in comparison with the one of Darius. The contents of the Aśokan edicts thus indicate that the Indian and the Achaemenian traditions are different from each other.

**Indigenous elements in Architecture**

The form of Aśoka's monuments essentially reflects indigenous architectural tradition. Though some foreign architectural influence cannot be ruled out, one cannot fail to notice the Indian elements embodied in them. The custom of erecting near sacrificial altars tall poles with a fluttering pennant at the top, and of setting such columns in front of palaces, temples, city-gates and public squares was indigenous. Aśoka seemed to have simply erected them in stone and used them as a commanding medium of propagating his dharma to the people.

**Aśoka's ideals: genesis and survival**

It is in the age-old Vedic respect for righteousness as the essence of kingship that Aśoka was a true votary of Indian tradition. Like the Brahmanic ruler 'dhammasya gopīṇa', Aśoka revered morality and moral virtues. Aśoka's edicts stated that the humane ideals

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3 VI RE Girnar; VII RE Girnar; cf. edicts at Jaugada, Dhauili.
4 Cf. Zimmer, op. cit., I, p. 248; Sen, op. cit., p. 46; Goetz, *India Five Thousand Years of Indian Art*, p. 47.
5 Goetz, *ibid*.
7 Cf. RE Brahmagiri; PE VII.
propagated therein were “an ancient rule”\(^8\), and that in was Aśoka’s wish that the humane ideals were continued to be practised by his “sons, grandsons, great-grandsons and descendante”...

“until the end of the universe”\(^9\).

The *Arthasastra* of Kautilya is replete with evidence to show that the concept of *dhamma* propagated by Aśoka’s edicts was nothing but a continuity of the similar tradition respected by Aśoka’s grandfather Chandragupta Maurya (to whose times the *Arthasastra* sources can plausibly be traced). Aśoka’s solicitude for the Brahmaṇas and Sramaṇas, dutifulness to parents, reverence to elders and teachers, kind treatment to slaves and servants, kindness to the poor and the suffering, gifts to the aged, the orphans, the infirm and the afflicted, and abstention from injuring or killing animals, seem to have sprung from the precepts of Kautilya\(^10\). The release of prisoners by Aśoka was also not a novel feature introduced by him, as Kautilya has already expressed that “on such of the days to which the birth star of the king is assigned, as well as on full-moon days, such prisoners as are young, old, diseased or helpless, shall be let out from the jail”\(^11\). Like Aśoka, Kautilya too is satisfied with *dharma-vijaya* and prefers it to *asura* and *lobhavijaya*. Though Kautilya often reveals himself as a pragmatic and machiavellian rationalist and justifies secret attacks on enemies, yet he respects the traditional cannon of the *Traya*, and the Vedas are objects of veneration for him, and he does not consent —at least in principle—to the violation of the sacred institutions of property, family and caste, and the tampering with the sacred rules of Aryan morals and ethics\(^12\). Even the paternal theory of Aśoka is probably not his own invention as the same is referred to by Kautilya\(^13\). It is also interesting to note that ‘priyadarśana’ was the epithet used by the author of the *Mudrārākṣhasa* to describe Chandragupta Maurya.

Aśoka’s successors Daśaratha and Samprati patronised the Ājīvika and Jain sects and raised *stūpas* as did Aśoka. Daśaratha assumed the title of *devaṇāṃpriya* borne by Aśoka, as is indicated in the inscription of the Ājīvika cave at the Nagarjuni hills.

Samprati, on the other hand, was influenced by the Jain monk Suhastin and distributed free alms and food to the poor and the orphans. The *Brihatkalpasūtra Bhāṣya* also states that he became

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\(^8\) Cf. RE Brahmagiri.

\(^9\) IVth and Vth RE Kalsi: *yāvatsaṁvartaka*...


\(^12\) *vyavasthitāryamaryadeḥ kriṭavarṇāsramasthitih / trayyā hi rakṣito lokaḥ prasidati naidati* //

an upāsaka and informed the frontier kings of the importance of the Jain precepts. Like Aśoka, he too undertook tours, planted trees, proclaimed prohibition of animal slaughter and built temples. Samprati's humane activities, thus, breathe the same tolerance and well-being as those of Aśoka.

The dharma ideal had also become a guiding principle of the Buddhist works. The Jātakas, for example, repeatedly speak of the Buddha as Dharma-chakravarti and his lieutenants as dharma-senāpatis. The fatherly attitude of Aśoka is also reflected in the Jātakamālā of Aryasūra, as one of its stories describes the Sibi ruler as a father to his subjects and distinguishes him for his charities, construction of alms-houses and relief to the distressed people.

The influence of the dharma ideal on ancient Indian polity is seen in the Catuhsatika of Āryadeva, who pleads for the reign of righteousness and condemns rulers who substitute violence for paternal care and justify their conduct by the rules of dharma. The Avaśyakachūrṇi of Haribhadra refers, on the other hand, to king Nahava of Bharukachcha exhausting his treasury in constructing temples, stūpas, roads and wells. According to the Mahāmangala Sutta of the Suttanipāta:

To serve father and mother,  
To cherish wife and child,  
To follow a peaceful calling,  
This is the greatest blessing.  
To bestow alms and live righteously,  
To give help to kindred,  
Deeds which cannot be blamed,  
This is the greatest blessing.

One who kills birds and animals, and does not treat animals with compassion should be considered to be an outcaste, according to the Vesala Sutta. Even thieves should be given reformatory training and should be treated with compassion, as the same sutta states elsewhere. Describing the various gifts, the Buddha says that the gift to vihāra is the best gift. The Dighanikāya states that the Vajjians will not be defeated as long as they worship their chaityas and give protection to the religious persons and other mendicants.

The two Indian epics —the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata have innumerable evidences to show a continuity of respect to the humane ideals of Aśoka's edicts.

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14 Story II. Cf. Dhamma Jātaka; Mahākapi Jātaka.
16 Sutta Nipāta, Mahāmangala Sutta, vs. 5-6. cf. Vasala Sutta, 9-10.
17 Ibid., Vasala Sutta, v. 2.
18 Nidānakathā, Anathapindikassa vihāradānam samghassa aggam Buddhena vanṇitam.
While addressing an assembly of kings, Daśaratha boasts that his excellent kingdom was nourished by his predecessors “as father nourishes his son” 19. Rama tells Lakshmana elsewhere that “in paying due respect to parents and superiors, lies great and unequalled merit” 20. The Rāmāyana, again, appears to continue the tradition of Aśoka’s edicts when it says that gifts to priests, cherishing servants and subjects, observance of moral duties, respect to aged persons, reverence to ascetics, gods and chaityas, suppression of the wicked, control of passions, forgiveness, piety, firmness and truth, are eternal royal duties and virtues 21. The number of chaityas, water-sheds and tanks indicate prosperity of the provinces 22. King Rama describes the importance of the opinions of the citizens in shaping the king’s opinions 23 and refraining from meat eating 24. A King observing virtue is compared with a deity 25, and a person engaged in the destruction of animals is made to suffer in hell 26.

The Mahābhārata too eulogizes the humane tradition reflected in Aśoka’s edicts. The duties of a king, for example, included protection of subjects, knowledge of the Vedas, practice of all kinds of penances, good conduct, gifts to the deserving, mercy towards all creatures, abstention from cruelty, mercy towards the aged, relief of the oppressed, protection of Brahmaṇas, and favour and rewards to the righteous 27. Construction of roads and water-sheds have been additional duties of a ruler 28. Forgiveness, self-control, purity, humility, abstention from injury, truthfulness, tranquility, simplicity and righteousness have been mentioned as important royal virtues 29.

The dharma-śāstras upheld dharma ideal, and —for them— the state became moral and spiritual rather than material and political. Respect to parents, reverence to teachers and elders and non-injury to living beings have been preached by Manu as noteworthy duties 30. The “paternal ideal” is alluded to by Manu 31, Kātyāyana 32.

19 Rāmāyana, Ayodhyākānda, I.  
20 Ibid., XXVI, vs. 14.  
21 Ibid., Ayodhyākānda, LXXX, C; Kishkindhakānda, XVII.  
22 Cf. Ibid., Ayodhyākānda, C.  
23 Ibid., Uttarākānda, LIII.  
24 Ibid., Ayodhyākānda, XVII.  
25 Ibid., Ayodhyākānda, CII.  
26 Ibid., Kishkindhakānda, XVII.  
27 Cf. Mahābhārata, Shāntiparva. XXI, 13-16; XXIII, 9-12; LXVI, 6, 20.  
22, 40. LXVIII, 45.  
28 Cf. Ibid., Shāntiparva, LXIX, 52-53.  
29 Cf. Ibid., Shāntiparva, VII, 6; XII, 17.  
246; V, 43-47, 56.  
31 Kane, Dharmaśāstra, III, p. 35.  
32 Āpituḥ pārthivāḥ pitā.
and Yājñavalkya. Maintenance of widows, orphans and the aged was an additional duty of the ruler, according to Kātyāyana. Protection of the people, offering of gifts, performance of sacrifice and study are the main duties of a king, according to Manu. Protection of all beings, award of just punishment, preservation of varṇas and āśramas, according to the rules of the śāstras, and support to Brāhmaṇas and śramaṇas have been prescribed by Gautama as additional responsibilities of the king. The lawgivers, in fact, seem to continue the conception of the traditional welfare-state looking after the protection of people, relief to the poor and freedom from hunger.

Śūdraka describes an ideal king as one well-versed in the Vedas and obedient to the laws of dharma. Āsvaghoṣa’s Saundarāṇanāda also indicates that the king-elect of Kapilāvastu accepted royalty for maintaining the precepts of dharma. While Bhāsa stands for the traditional supremacy of dharma, Kālidāsa believes in the paternal ideal of kingship in as much as he describes the king as the real father of his subjects, though their parents begot them. The Daśakumāracharita of Daṇḍin, like Kāmanaḍaka’s Nitisāra, extols the value of dharma and emphasises the importance of moral discipline in princes. The Purāṇas too hold the dharma to be the basis of moral order and the maintenance of dharma to be the chief duty of a king. The Agni Purāṇa states that the king should give patronage to Brahmins and ascetics, build temples, feed the aged, the imbecile, the widow and the orphan, and respect and reward the Brahmins.

Somadeva, the author of the Nītivākyāmṛitam, recognises self-control, education, discipline, association with the aged and the wise, as the primary qualifications of a king; and deprecates severity and treachery in war. And the Sukranitisāra maintains that a good king combines in himself all the functions and virtues of a father, mother, preceptor, protector and friend; and considers construction of roads, building of serais, improving the moral and material conditions of his subjects, and spending a large amount in charity, as important royal duties.

The advice given by Rāmdās to Shivāji after the death of Afzalkhan, reflects the importance of the dharma ideal even during the 17th century. The Dāsabōdh states that the progress of a kingdom depends on the progress of dharma which, therefore, needs royal

\[33\text{ I, 351.}\]
\[34\text{ Manusmṛti, I, 89.}\]
\[35\text{ Gautama, Dharmasūtra, X, 7-10.}\]
\[36\text{ I, 60-63.}\]
\[37\text{ sa pitarastāsām kevalam janmahētavah.}\]
It maintains that the royal duties of divine worship, taking care of the Brahmanas and protecting the people, are "god's gifts". Even Tukārām writes to Shivāji that "protection of the helpless" was a royal duty. The Rāmcharita Mānas of Tulsidas too states that "in the whole of creation, there is nothing of such abiding value for the generations to come as saintliness of character".

Later Epigraphic evidences

The humane ideals of Aśoka are reflected in innumerable epigraphic sources of later times from the first to the twelfth century A.D. The Nasik cave inscription of Gautamiputra Shātakarni states that he "never levied nor employed taxes but in conformity with dharma", sympathised fully with the weal and woe of the citizens and was "alien to hurting life even towards an offending enemy" and "stopped the contamination of the four varṇas". Nahāpana, the Western Satrap, is known to have built many temples, while his son-in-law Ushavadāta gave alms, built cells and dedicated caves and cisterns. One of the inscriptions of Vākṣṭaka Pravarāsena glorifies his dharma; and the Valabhi inscriptions repeatedly speak of the rulers' regard for the rules of morality. One of the Valabhi kings, Droṇasimha, for example, followed the laws of Manu and the sages, and was devoted, like Yudhiṣṭhira, to the path of dharma. The Sanskrit inscription of the Pallava ruler Viṣṇugopa, too, describes him not only as a virtuous ruler and well-versed in good government, but also as one who had assumed royalty merely as an ascetic with a vow of protecting and maintaining subjects according to dharma. The Girnar inscription of Skandagupta not only describes his minister as engaged in doing good to humanity, but also as discharged from moral liabilities by his performance of duties. In fact in his kingdom there was no man devoid of dharma or suffering from wants. The Kadamba rulers of Banavāsi too did not lag behind in recognising the importance of the dharma ideal. One of the Talgunda stone inscriptions of Mysore State praises king Kakusthavarman as kind to the needy.

38 dharmavriddhine rājyavriddhi āhe, dharmasthāpanechi Kirti sāmbhālali pāhīte.
39 Cf. Dāsabōdh, Daśak 18, Samās 6, vs. 19.
40 Cf. Gāthā of Tukārām, art III, 4443 5.
41 dharmopajita Karaviniyoga Karasa / porajana nirvīsesa samasukhadukhasa /
43 Cf. Luder's List No 1131, 1132.
45 G. I. N. 38.
46 I. A. V, 51-52.
just, protector of the people and helper of the humble. The Kadambas are also styled in the Nilambur copper plates of king Ravivarman as rulers “who were (like unto) mothers to people (who were) dependent (on them). The intellectual attainments of Dhārasena are repeatedly mentioned in the Valabhi inscription which compares him with Dharmarāja; and other Valabhi rulers were proud to protect the weak, preserve religious grants, and avert calamities of subjects. Even the mediaeval ruler Vikram Chōla boasts that he followed the laws of Manu and protected all his subjects like a loving mother.

The title ‘dharma-mahārāja’ borne by the Pallava, Kadamba, Ganga and other rulers, indicates the respect these Indian rulers had for the dharma ideal.

Cultural heritage

Aśoka’s edicts and subsequent evidences thus prove that India cherished and maintained throughout the ages, political ideals which respected humanity more than narrow social groups, love more than hatred, tolerance more than fanaticism, and pacifism more than violence.

It was in this land that several oppressed races and nomadic barbarians were sheltered and made to realise the importance of living a life of peaceful co-existence in spite of differences. The debt of conquerors like Darius and Alexander was paid but in quite a different manner. Though they succeeded in their mission of violence, this land returned violence by pacifism. Though the barbarian Śakas, Pahlavas, Kushāṇs and Hūṇas inflicted destruction, this land offered them, in return, tolerance and humane receptivity. Aśoka’s moral pacific teachings have been a great source of inspiration even in modern India where the teachings and work of Gandhiji largely convey the basic ideals of non-violence, human freedom, tolerance, communal harmony and mutual respect, universal brotherhood and peace. Aśoka’s edicts, preaching harmony and co-operation, have become relevant and meaningful in the world today when national and international problems have become moral problems.