

Ashoka's Dhamma Policy

(Concept)

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Different historians have different concept about Ashoka's Dhamma, because of his personal faith in Buddhism. Most of Ashoka's inscriptions are about dhamma(the Prakrit form of dharma) . The theme of Dhamma was acceptable to people belonging to any religious sect. Dhamma was not defined in terms of rules and regulations. Of the basic principles, Asoka laid more stress on toleration. Toleration according to him was of two kinds: toleration of people themselves and also of their beliefs and ideas, as mentioned in rock edict 12. The theme of ahimsa (non-injury) is an important aspect of Ashoka's dhamma and is very frequently mentioned. Rock edict I speaks of ban on animal sacrifices, (at some or all places) and on certain type of festive gatherings that probably included killing of animals, as also its reduction in the royal kitchen. The good conduct and social responsibilities were one of the chores of Ashoka's dhamma policy. He attacked the useless ceremonies and sacrifices held as a result of superstitious beliefs as those meant for a safe journey or a quick recovery from illness. Rock edict 9 begins with the criticism of these ceremonies. Rock edict 11 refers to the gift of dhamma being the best of all gifts. Pillar edict 2 describes dhamma as consisting of the least amount of sin, performing many virtuous deeds, compassion, liberality, truthfulness and purity. Ashoka's inscriptions speaks about of the dhamma of the King. Rock edict 6 talks of his ideals and goals- to promote the welfare of all his people, discharge the debts of the people, and ensure happiness in the world.

In the 13th major rock edict, Ashoka recounts of the war against Kalinga eight years after his coronation, thereafter his reasoned critique of war, pointing out that it led directly or indirectly to suffering for all. According to pillar edict 6, the practice of inscribing dhamma edicts on stone begun 13 years after Ashoka's coronation. Very few people would have known how to read or write at the time, so he made elaborate arrangements for its oral propagation. To implement the policy of Dhamma, Ashoka instituted officers of Dhamma called Dhamma mahamatas. Rock edict 5 speaks of Dhamma mahamatas, spreading Dhamma among Yonas, Kambojas, Gandharas, Rishtikas and Pitinikas.

Historians hold different views about the nature of the dhamma of Ashoka's inscriptions. It has been a sort of universal religion -containing certain common elements in many religious traditions. It has been interpreted as a form of raj-dharma, consisting of the political and moral principles emphasised in the Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions. According to Romilla Thapar, the policy of Dhamma did not succeed. It may have been because of Ashoka's over anxiety that it has to be accepted or his own weakness when in the latter part of his reign he became obsessed with Dhamma. Basically, it failed to provide a solution to the problems which is set out to solve. Thapar has underlined the political rationale behind the propagation of dhamma. Nevertheless, Ashoka deserves admiration for recognizing the need for a guiding principle and trying to provide one. According to Upinder Singh, an understanding of Ashoka's dhamma has to move beyond textual analysis. The Buddhist element in Ashoka's dhamma can be seen in sculptural motifs associated with pillars too.

There is no doubt that Ashoka's Dhamma was inspired by Buddhist upasaka dhamma but it was not the same. Dhamma was

universal, with respect towards all faiths and sects. It was a moral code of conduct to be followed by all . His concept of Dhamma-vijaya too had its roots in Buddhist text, but it went beyond it and encompassed one and all.