

Edicts of the Indian Mauryan Emperor Ashoka

Introduction

The edicts of the Indian Mauryan emperor Ashoka (c.268–233 BCE) are inscribed on boulders, rock outcroppings, or tall monolithic pillars found across northern and central India. Ainslie Embree's editorial comments serve to illuminate particular passages and weave together these imperial statements into a cohesive whole. Ashoka's renown stems largely from his conversion to Buddhism and his support of the religion in his empire. These edicts, however, reveal a much broader concern for the royal responsibilities of health care provider, facilitator of trade, and law arbiter. When one examines both the texts and their placement across the empire, Ashoka's abilities as a ruler over diverse ethnicities, religious sects, and linguistic groups come to the fore.

As the third Mauryan emperor, Ashoka inherited a large region of northern India, with a capital city – Pataliputra (present-day Patna) – on the Ganges river. Stretching from present-day Pakistan in the west to what is now Bangladesh to the east, the Mauryan empire under Ashoka was large and multifarious. The inscriptions were written in Prakrit, a vernacular language, using the ancient Brahmi script. On some far-flung edicts, such as those near Afghanistan to the west, Prakrit is joined by a local vernacular translation. Ashoka clearly wished these statements to reach as many of his subjects as possible. Furthermore, the pillars and rock edicts lie along major trade routes, giving them a greater audience, one that traveled across the empire and could spread the edicts' message.

The inscriptions' placements corresponded with more than just trade routes. In many cases they also marked holy or auspicious sites, locations that already carried a spiritual weight. For example, at Sarnath Ashoka erected a large pillar, topped by

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an elaborately carved capital of four adorning, hieratic lions supported by a series of symbols, including the wheel and various animals. Sarnath was the site of the Buddha's first sermon, in which he explained the major tenets of Buddhism to his followers. In doing so, he set the wheel (*chakra*) of *dharma* into motion, or, in other words, he presented the Buddhist "law" (*dharma*): the right path or, as Embree translates, the path of righteousness. Lions facing four directions indicate the area over which Ashoka ruled, as well as representing the strength of the leader. At the same time they refer to the Buddha, whose many names and titles include Shakyasimha, or the Lion of the Shakya clan. The iconography of the Ashokan pillar, combined with its placement at important Buddhist sites, reinforces both the dominion of Ashoka and the religious beliefs he hoped to spread.

In addition to the internal political information they provide, these inscriptions indicate the Mauryan relationship to other empires, including the Greeks, communicate what Buddhism meant in the third century BCE, and show some of the personality of Ashoka himself. They can be read at face value to give a sense of why, for example, Ashoka has become vegetarian, or read to understand how history and religion are shaped by those who live them. Ashoka was a powerful and savvy political ruler who understood the value of communication, even with ancient media such as stone pillars and rock outcroppings.

Ashoka: The Buddhist Emperor

The great emperor Ashoka (c. 268–233 BCE), third of the line of the Mauryas, became a Buddhist and attempted to govern India according to the precepts of Buddhism as he understood them. His new policy was promulgated in a series of edicts, which are still to be found, engraved on rocks and pillars in many parts of India. Written in a form of Prakrit, or ancient vernacular, with several local variations, they can claim little literary merit, for their style is crabbed and often ambiguous. In one of these edicts he describes his conversion, and its effects:

[From the Thirteenth Rock Edict]

When the king, Beloved of the Gods and of Gracious Mien, had been consecrated eight years Kalinga¹ was conquered, 150,000 people were deported, 100,000 were killed, and many times that number died. But after the conquest of Kalinga, the Beloved of the Gods began to follow righteousness [*dharma*], to love righteousness, and to give instruction in righteousness. Now the Beloved of the Gods regrets the conquest of Kalinga, for when an independent country is conquered people are killed, they die, or are deported, and that the Beloved of the Gods finds very painful and grievous. And this he finds even more grievous – that all the inhabitants – brahmins, ascetics, and other sectarians, and householders who are obedient to superiors; parents, and elders, who treat friends,

acquaintances, companions, relatives, slaves, and servants with respect, and are firm in their faith – all suffer violence, murder, and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate enough not to have lost those near and dear to them are afflicted at the misfortunes of friends, acquaintances, companions, and relatives. The participation of all men in common suffering is grievous to the Beloved of the Gods. Moreover there is no land, except that of the Greeks, where groups of brahmins and ascetics are not found, or where men are not members of one sect or another. So now, even if the number of those killed and captured in the conquest of Kalinga had been a hundred or a thousand times less, it would be grievous to the Beloved of the Gods. The Beloved of the Gods will forgive as far as he can, and he even conciliates the forest tribes of his dominions; but he warns them that there is power even in the remorse of the Beloved of the Gods, and he tells them to reform, lest they be killed.²

For all beings the Beloved of the Gods desires security, self-control, calm of mind, and gentleness. The Beloved of the Gods considers that the greatest victory is the victory of righteousness; and this he has won here [in India] and even five hundred leagues beyond his frontiers in the realm of the Greek king Antiochus, and beyond Antiochus among the four kings Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas, and Alexander.³ Even where the envoys of the Beloved of the Gods have not been sent men hear of the way in which he follows and teaches righteousness, and they too follow it and will follow it. Thus he achieves a universal conquest, and conquest always gives a feeling of pleasure; yet it is but a slight pleasure, for the Beloved of the Gods only looks on that which concerns the next life as of great importance.

I have had this inscription of righteousness engraved that all my sons and grandsons may not seek to gain new victories, that in whatever victories they may gain they may prefer forgiveness and light punishment, that they may consider the only [valid] victory the victory of righteousness, which is of value both in this world and the next, and that all their pleasure may be in righteousness. . . .

Ashoka's Buddhism, as his title shows, did not lessen his belief in the gods. Here he expresses his faith in Buddhism and declares that the gods have appeared on earth as a result of his reforms:⁴

[From a minor Rock Edict (Maski Version)]

Thus speaks Ashoka, the Beloved of the Gods. For two and a half years I have been an open follower of the Buddha, though at first I did not make much progress. But for more than a year now I have drawn closer to the [Buddhist] Order, and have made much progress. In India the gods who formerly did not mix with men now do so. This is the result of effort, and may be obtained not only by the great, but even by the small, through effort – thus they may even easily win heaven.

Father and mother should be obeyed, teachers should be obeyed; pity . . . should be felt for all creatures. These virtues of righteousness should be practiced. . . . This is an ancient rule, conducive to long life.

[From the Ninth Rock Edict]

It is good to give, but there is no gift, no service, like the gift of righteousness. So friends, relatives, and companions should preach it on all occasions. This is duty; this is right; by this heaven may be gained – and what is more important than to gain heaven?

The emphasis on morality is if anything intensified in the series of the seven Pillar Edicts, issued some thirteen years after the Rock Edicts, when the king had been consecrated twenty-six years:

[From the First Pillar Edict]

This world and the other are hard to gain without great love of righteousness, great self examination, great obedience, great circumspection, great effort. Through my instruction respect and love righteousness daily increase and will increase. . . . For this is my rule--to govern by righteousness, to administer by righteousness, to please my subjects by righteousness, and to protect them by righteousness.

Ashoka's solicitude extended to the animal life of his empire, which in ancient India was generally thought to be subject to the king, just as was human life. He banned animal sacrifices at least in his capital, introduced virtual vegetarianism in the royal household, and limited the slaughter of certain animals; his policy in this respect is made clear in his very first Rock Edict:

[From the First Rock Edict]

Here⁵ no animal is to be killed for sacrifice, and no festivals are to be held, for the king finds much evil in festivals,⁶ except for certain festivals which he considers good.

Formerly in the Beloved of the God's kitchen several hundred thousand animals were killed daily for food; but now at the time of writing only three are killed – two peacocks and a deer, though the deer not regularly. Even these three animals will not be killed in future.

[From the Second Pillar Edict]

I have in many ways given the gift of clear vision. On men and animals, birds and fish I have conferred many boons, even to saving their lives; and I have done many other good deeds.

In accordance with the precepts of Buddhism Ashoka, for all his apparent other-worldliness, did not neglect the material welfare of his subjects, and he was especially interested in giving them medical aid:

[From the Second Rock Edict]

Everywhere in the empire of the Beloved of the Gods, and even beyond his frontiers in the lands of the Cholas, Pandyas, Satyaputras, Keralaputras,⁷ and as far as Ceylon, and in the kingdoms of Antiochus the Greek king and the kings who are his neighbors, the Beloved of the Gods has provided medicines for man and beast. Wherever medicinal plants have not been found they have been sent there and planted. Roots and fruits have also been sent where they did not grow and have been planted. Wells have been dug along the roads for the use of man and beast.

Ashoka felt a moral responsibility not only for his own subjects, but for all men, and he realized that they could not lead moral lives, and gain merit in order to find a place in heaven, unless they were happy and materially well cared for:

[From the Sixth Rock Edict]

I am not satisfied simply with hard work or carrying out the affairs of state, for I consider my work to be the welfare of the whole world, of which hard work and the carrying out of affairs are merely the basis. There is no better deed than to work for the welfare of the whole world, and all my efforts are made that I may clear my debt to all beings. I make them happy here and now that they may attain heaven in the life to come. . . . But it is difficult without great effort.

He speaks in peremptory tones to the officers of state who are slow in putting the new policy into effect:

[From the First Separate Kalinga Edict]

By order of the Beloved of the Gods. Addressed to the officers in charge of Tosali.⁸ . . . Let us win the affection of all men. All men are my children, and as I wish all welfare and happiness in this world and the next for my own children, so do I wish it for all men. But you do not realize what this entails - here and there an officer may understand in part, but not entirely.

Often a man is imprisoned and tortured unjustly, and then he is liberated for no [apparent] reason. Many other people suffer also [as a result of this injustice]. Therefore it is desirable that you should practice impartiality, but it cannot be attained if you are inclined to habits of jealousy, irritability, harshness, hastiness, obstinacy, laziness, or lassitude. I desire you not to have these habits. The basis of all this is the constant avoidance of irritability and hastiness in your business. . . .

This inscription has been engraved in order that the officials of the city should always see to it that no one is ever imprisoned or tortured without good cause. To ensure this I shall send out every five years on a tour of inspection officers who are not fierce or harsh. . . . The prince at Ujjain shall do the same not more than every three years, and likewise at Taxila.

Later, in his Pillar Edicts, Ashoka seems more satisfied that his officers are carrying out the new policy:

[From the Fourth Pillar Edict]

My governors are placed in charge of hundreds of thousands of people. Under my authority they have power to judge and to punish, that they calmly and fearlessly carry out their duties, and that they may bring welfare and happiness to the people of the provinces and be of help to them. They will know what brings joy and what brings sorrow, and, conformably to righteousness, they will instruct the people of the provinces that they may be happy in this world and the next. . . . And as when one entrusts a child to a skilled nurse one is confident that . . . she will care for it well, so have I appointed my governors for the welfare and happiness of the people. That they may fearlessly carry out their duties I have given them power to judge and to inflict punishment on their own initiative. I wish that there should be uniformity of justice and punishment.

In numerous passages Ashoka stresses the hard work that the new policy demands of him. He has given up many of the pleasures of the traditional Indian king, including, of course, hunting, in order to further it:

[From the Eighth Rock Edict]

In the past, kings went out on pleasure trips and indulged in hunting and similar amusements. But the Beloved of the Gods . . . ten years after his consecration set out on the journey to Enlightenment.⁹ Now when he goes on tour . . . he interviews and gives gifts to brahmins and ascetics; he interviews and gives money to the aged; he interviews the people of the provinces and instructs and questions them on righteousness; and the pleasure which the Beloved of the Gods derives therefrom is as good as a second revenue.

As we have seen, Ashoka, though a Buddhist, respects brahmins and the members of all sects, and he calls on his subjects to follow his example:

[From the Twelfth Rock Edict]

The Beloved of the Gods . . . honors members of all sects, whether ascetics or householders, by gifts and various honors. But he does not consider gifts and honors as important as the furtherance of the essential message of all sects. This essential message varies from sect to sect, but it has one common basis, that one should so control one's tongue as not to honor one's own sect or disparage another's on the wrong occasions; for on certain occasions one should do so only mildly, and indeed on other occasions one should honor other men's sects. By doing this one strengthens one's own sect and helps the others, whereas by doing otherwise one harms one's

own sect and does a disservice to the others. Whoever honors his own sect and disparages another man's, whether from blind loyalty or with the intention of showing his own sect in a favorable light, does his own sect the greatest possible harm. Concord is best, with each hearing and respecting the other's teachings. It is the wish of the Beloved of the Gods that members of all sects should be learned and should teach virtue. . . . Many officials are busied in this matter . . . and the result is the progress of my own sect and the illumination of righteousness.

Although he was by no means a rationalist, it appears that Ashoka thought little of the many rituals and ceremonies of Indian domestic life:

[From the Ninth Rock Edict]

People perform various ceremonies, at the marriage of sons and daughters, at the birth of children, when going on a journey . . . or on other occasions. . . . On such occasions women especially perform many ceremonies that are various, futile, and useless. Even when they have to be done [to conform to custom and keep up appearances] such ceremonies are of little use. But the ceremonies of righteousness are of great profit – there are the good treatment of slaves and servants, respect for elders, self-mastery in one's relations with living beings, gifts to brahman and ascetics, and so on. But for their success everyone – fathers, mothers, brothers, masters, friends, acquaintances, and neighbors – must agree . . . “These are good! These are the ceremonies that we should perform for success in our undertakings . . . and when we have succeeded we will perform them again!” Other ceremonies are of doubtful utility – one may achieve one's end through them or one may not. Moreover they are only of value in this world, whereas the value of the ceremonies of righteousness is eternal, for even if one does not achieve one's end in this world one stores up boundless merit in the other; yet if one achieves one's end in this world the gain is double.

We conclude this selection of the edicts of Ashoka with his last important inscription, in which the emperor, eighteen years after his conversion, reviews his reign:

[From the Seventh Pillar Edict]

In the past, kings sought to make the people progress in righteousness, but they did not progress. . . . And I asked myself how I might uplift them through progress in righteousness. . . . Thus I decided to have them instructed in righteousness, and to issue ordinances of righteousness, so that by hearing them the people might conform, advance in the progress of righteousness, and themselves make great progress. . . . For that purpose many officials are employed among the people to instruct them in righteousness and to explain it to them. . . .

Moreover I have had banyan trees planted on the roads to give shade to man and beast; I have planted mango groves, and I have had ponds dug and shelters erected along the roads at every eight kos.¹⁰ Everywhere I have had wells dug

for the benefit of man and beast. But his benefit is but small, for in many ways the kings of olden time have worked for the welfare of the world; but what I have done has been done that men may conform to righteousness.

All the good deeds that I have done have been accepted and followed by the people. And so obedience to mother and father, obedience to teachers, respect for the aged, kindness to brahmins and ascetics, to the poor and weak, and to slaves and servants, have increased and will continue to increase. . . . And this progress of righteousness among men has taken place in two manners, by enforcing conformity to righteousness, and by exhortation. I have enforced the law against killing certain animals and many others, but the greatest progress of righteousness among men comes from exhortation in favor of noninjury to life and abstention from killing living beings.¹¹

I have done this that it may endure . . . as long as the moon and sun and that my sons and my great-grandsons may support it; for by supporting it they will gain both this world and the next.

Notes

- 1 The coastal region [of India] comprising the modern Orissa and the northern part of Andhra State.
- 2 Note that Ashoka has by no means completely abandoned the use of force. This passage probably refers to the tribesmen of the hills and jungles, who still occasionally cause trouble for the government in Assam and in other parts of India, and who in ancient days were a much greater problem.
- 3 Antiochus II Theos of Syria, Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander of Epirus. Classical sources tell us nothing about Ashoka's "victories of righteousness" over these kings. Probably he sent envoys to them, urging them to accept his new policy and his moral leadership. Evidently he never gave up his imperial ambitions, but attempted to further them in a benevolent spirit and without recourse to arms.
- 4 Some authorities have put different interpretations on the relevant phrases, but in our opinion there can be little doubt about their meaning.
- 5 There is some reason to believe that the adverb implies the royal capital of Pataliputra.
- 6 *Samaja*, generally interpreted as a fair or festival, but perhaps a society or club. A tone of rather pompous puritanism is sometimes evident in the edicts and suggests a less congenial side of Ashoka's character.
- 7 Tamil kingdoms, in the southern tip of the peninsula.
- 8 The chief town of Kalinga, the region conquered by Ashoka in his last war of aggression.
- 9 This phrase probably implies that Ashoka made a pilgrimage to the Bodhi Tree at Gaya.
- 10 Sanskrit *krosha*: calling distance, or about two miles; thus here, intervals of about sixteen miles, or a day's journey.
- 11 For all his humanitarianism Ashoka did not abolish the death penalty, as did some later Indian kings.