



AŚOKA I. THE LIFE AND TEACHING OF AŚOKA

i. The Life and Teaching of Aśoka

Aśoka was the most powerful king and an inspired leader of ancient South Asia, who for at least fifteen years proclaimed rules of social behavior which were both humane and practicable.

Aśoka's regnal years and the extent of his empire are known approximately. According to the tradition recorded in the Pali chronicles of Ceylon Aśoka ruled four years before and 37 years after his consecration in the year 218 after the Lord Buddha's *Nirvāṇa* (ca. 486 B.C.). Aśoka's authority extended over most of the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, excluding its southernmost portion (and probably parts of Sindh and Bengal) but including considerable areas of present Afghanistan.

Aśoka was a son of Bindusāra (ca. 300-272 B.C.) and a grandson of Candragupta (ca. 324-300), the founder of the Maurya empire. He at first reigned ruthlessly like most of his predecessors had done, but a campaign against Kalinga (present Orissa) in his ninth regnal year brought about a complete change in Aśoka, as he himself admitted in his thirteenth Rock Edict four years later. On this occasion he emphasized that military victory is worthless; the only true victory is the victory of (or by) *Dhamma* (Pali: righteousness; Skt. *dharma*). It is clear that Aśoka was converted to Buddhism



some time later and, from his thirteenth regnal year, began a vigorous drive to propagate his ideas on *Dhamma*, a true ideology in fact, by means of edicts engraved on rocks and pillars in different parts of the empire, especially along the main highways, at crossroads and other centers of economic activity. The versions of each individual edict show differences in script, language or dialect, (which proves that Áśoka's inscriptions were intended for large sections of the population), and details of formulation, although the contents are basically the same. Four scripts are used: (1) *brāhmī*, (of Indian origin); (2) *kharoṣṭhī*, based on Aramaic but with additional letters and vowel marks; (3) Aramaic in the bilingual, Greek and Aramaic, Minor Rock Edict of Śār-i Kuna (Kandahar), as well as in two fragmentary inscriptions of Taxila and Pul-i Darunta (near Jalālābād, Afghanistan); (4) Greek (script and language) in the above-mentioned bilingual inscription and in fragments of Rock Edicts XII and XIII at Kandahar. The *brāhmī* and *kharoṣṭhī* inscriptions are in four different Prakrit dialects, depending on their location.

The most consistent single theme running through the edicts is that of social obligations. Children are admonished to obey their elders, subjects to be loyal to the king and his representatives, while all people owe respect to brahmans and ascetics, tolerance for different creeds or customs and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*) towards the creatures in general. This prohibition of killing living beings was, however, by no means absolute. It was apparently principally directed against certain Hindu rituals involving the slaughter of numerous animal. On the other hand, Áśoka clearly did not enjoin vegetarianism on his subjects.

It does not seem as though Áśoka's ideology was meant to reform Indian society to any clearly defined pattern. Its aim was more probably that of laying down standards of social behavior which were regarded as proper by most articulate Indians of those times. The present tendency among scholars is to regard Áśoka as above all a practical statesman who propagated his *Dhamma* to supply a common ideology to the numerous peoples, tribes, and other groups in his empire. This alone could give a true meaning to the political unification of the subcontinent and create a lasting empire. Although Áśoka was apparently unsuccessful—the Maurya empire disintegrated soon after his death—it is likely that he contributed more than any other political figure of ancient India to the gradual formation of an Indian identity.



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See also *Camb. Hist. Iran* III/2, pp. 950-51, 1180, 1236.