



ISSN: 2231-5063

IMPACT FACTOR : 4.6052 (UIF)

VOLUME - 11 | ISSUE - 2 | AUGUST - 2021

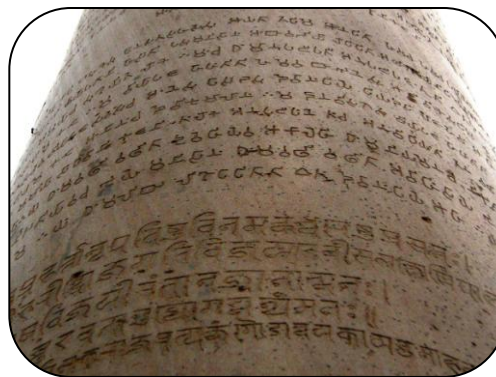
THE ROCK EDICTS OF ASHOKA: INSIGHTS INTO ANCIENT INDIAN GOVERNANCE

K. R. Vivekananda

M.A,PGD, Assistant Professor, Hosadurga.

ABSTRACT:

This 2000-word article explores the Rock Edicts of Ashoka, shedding light on their historical significance and their profound insights into ancient Indian governance. Emperor Ashoka, renowned for his moral leadership and commitment to ethical governance, left a remarkable legacy through these inscriptions. The article discusses key themes in the Rock Edicts, including the promotion of Dhamma, religious tolerance, social welfare, and administrative decrees. It also examines how Ashoka's governance principles continue to influence modern leadership and societal values. The Rock Edicts of Ashoka serve as a timeless source of inspiration, emphasizing the enduring importance of moral governance and ethical leadership in our world.



KEYWORDS: *promotion of Dhamma, religious tolerance, social welfare, and administrative decrees.*

INTRODUCTION

India's rich history is replete with remarkable rulers and emperors who left their indelible mark on the subcontinent. Among them, Emperor Ashoka, also known as Ashoka the Great, stands as one of the most iconic figures in Indian history. His reign, which spanned from 268 BCE to 232 BCE, is notable not only for its territorial expansion but also for its emphasis on moral governance and humanitarian principles. One of the most significant legacies of Ashoka's rule is the collection of inscriptions known as the Rock Edicts of Ashoka. These inscriptions provide profound insights into the governance, ethics, and societal values of ancient India, offering a timeless perspective on the principles of just rule and moral leadership.

THE LIFE AND REIGN OF ASHOKA

To understand the significance of the Rock Edicts, we must first delve into the life and reign of Ashoka. Born in 304 BCE, Ashoka was the son of Emperor Bindusara and ascended to the Mauryan throne

after a violent succession battle. His early reign was marked by conquests and military campaigns that expanded the Mauryan Empire to its zenith, encompassing much of the Indian subcontinent, including present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

However, it was during the aftermath of the Kalinga War in 261 BCE that Ashoka underwent a profound transformation. The brutality and suffering he witnessed in this conflict deeply moved him, prompting a shift in his governing philosophy. Ashoka embraced Buddhism, renounced violence, and adopted a path of non-violence (ahimsa) and moral governance.

The Rock Edicts: A Medium of Communication

The Rock Edicts of Ashoka are a series of inscriptions found on natural rock surfaces and pillars throughout his empire. Ashoka used these inscriptions as a means to communicate with his subjects, and they provide invaluable insights into his vision of governance. These edicts, composed in various Prakrit dialects and written in the Brahmi script, were designed to be accessible to a wide audience, reinforcing Ashoka's commitment to reaching all segments of society.

Key Themes in the Rock Edicts

Promotion of Dhamma

At the core of Ashoka's edicts is the concept of Dhamma, a term often associated with righteousness, morality, and the teachings of Buddhism. Ashoka sought to propagate Dhamma as a guiding principle of governance, emphasizing the importance of ethical conduct, compassion, and respect for all living beings. In several edicts, he expresses his desire to promote Dhamma and encourage its practice among his subjects.

Ashoka's commitment to Dhamma extended beyond mere rhetoric. He undertook a series of initiatives to promote ethical behavior, including establishing hospitals and dispensaries for humans and animals, constructing rest houses for travelers, and organizing Dhamma missions to spread moral teachings.

Religious Tolerance

Another remarkable aspect of Ashoka's governance was his commitment to religious tolerance. In a time when religious conflicts were not uncommon, Ashoka promoted the coexistence of various religious traditions. He not only embraced Buddhism but also respected the diversity of belief systems within his empire, including Jainism, Brahmanism, and other sects. This commitment to religious harmony is evident in several Rock Edicts.

In the Kalinga Rock Edict, Ashoka expresses his remorse for the suffering caused by the Kalinga War and his dedication to avoiding such conflicts in the future. He emphasizes his desire to conquer through Dhamma, not force, and to promote the welfare and happiness of all his subjects, regardless of their faith.

Social Welfare

Ashoka's vision of governance extended to social welfare and the well-being of his subjects. Many Rock Edicts detail his efforts to provide medical care, protection of wildlife, and support for the elderly and the vulnerable. These early initiatives for social welfare and animal rights are strikingly progressive for their time.

In the Maski Rock Edict, Ashoka mentions his dedication to the welfare of his subjects and the need for responsible governance. He instructs his officials to ensure the well-being of the people by promoting Dhamma and moral conduct.

Administrative Decrees

The Rock Edicts also contain specific administrative decrees, shedding light on the organizational structure of the Mauryan Empire. Ashoka appointed officials known as Dhamma Mahamattas to ensure the implementation of his policies and edicts throughout the empire. These officials were responsible for promoting moral values and ethical behavior among the populace.

In the Queen's Edict at Lumbini, Ashoka discusses his efforts to improve the administration of justice and provide equitable treatment to all. He emphasizes the importance of impartiality and fairness in the legal system.

Insights into Ancient Indian Governance

The Rock Edicts of Ashoka offer several crucial insights into the nature of governance in ancient India:

Decentralized Governance

Ashoka's empire was vast, stretching from the Himalayas to the Deccan Plateau. To effectively govern such a vast and diverse territory, he employed a decentralized administrative structure. The Rock Edicts reveal that he relied on local officials and governors to enforce his policies, allowing for more efficient governance and responsiveness to local needs.

In the Bhabru Edict, Ashoka discusses the appointment of Dhamma Mahamattas (officers of Dhamma) who were responsible for conveying his message and ensuring that his policies were implemented at the local level. This approach to governance allowed for greater flexibility and adaptability in addressing the needs of different regions.

Moral Leadership

Ashoka's emphasis on morality and ethical conduct as essential aspects of governance set a precedent for rulers in ancient India. His belief in the power of moral leadership and the promotion of Dhamma as a unifying force highlight the importance of virtuous rule in ancient Indian political thought. In the Bairat Edict, Ashoka reflects on his personal journey towards embracing Dhamma and acknowledges the transformative power of moral principles in his life. He expresses his desire for the welfare and happiness of his subjects and the need for ethical conduct in both public and private life.

Inclusivity and Tolerance

Ashoka's commitment to religious tolerance and inclusivity was groundbreaking for its time. In a world marked by religious strife, his edicts championed the idea that the state should respect and protect the rights of all religious communities. This commitment to pluralism and coexistence serves as a timeless lesson in fostering harmony and unity in a diverse society.

In the Separate Rock Edicts, Ashoka mentions his visits to various religious places and his dedication to promoting religious tolerance and understanding among different faiths. He emphasizes the importance of dialogue and mutual respect.

Social Responsibility

The Rock Edicts underscore Ashoka's belief in the ruler's responsibility for the welfare of the people. His initiatives for social welfare, such as the provision of medical care and support for the vulnerable, reveal a compassionate approach to governance that aimed to alleviate suffering and improve the lives of his subjects.

In the Dhauili Rock Edict, Ashoka discusses his efforts to promote the practice of Dhamma and the importance of kindness and generosity. He encourages his subjects to live in harmony and help one another.

Legacy and Influence

The influence of Ashoka's Rock Edicts extends far beyond ancient India. They serve as a source of inspiration for leaders and thinkers worldwide, emphasizing the enduring importance of moral governance and ethical leadership. In modern India, Ashoka remains an iconic figure, symbolizing the ideals of peace, tolerance, and social responsibility.

The Rock Edicts also played a role in the spread of Buddhism beyond India's borders. Ashoka's commitment to Buddhism and the propagation of Dhamma helped establish Buddhism as a major world religion, with its teachings reaching as far as Southeast Asia.

In the 20th century, the principles advocated in Ashoka's edicts, such as non-violence, social welfare, and religious tolerance, found resonance with leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, who led India's struggle for independence using non-violent resistance. Gandhi often referred to Ashoka as his spiritual and political predecessor, underscoring the enduring relevance of Ashoka's ideas.

CONCLUSION

The Rock Edicts of Ashoka stand as a remarkable testament to the principles of governance, morality, and compassion in ancient India. Through these inscriptions, Ashoka left a lasting legacy that continues to inspire leaders and societies to this day. His commitment to moral leadership, religious tolerance, and social welfare serves as a timeless reminder of the enduring values that can shape a just and compassionate society. In a world marked by political and social challenges, the lessons of Ashoka's edicts offer a beacon of hope and a blueprint for ethical governance. As we reflect on the Rock Edicts of Ashoka, we are reminded of the transformative power of moral leadership and the potential for positive change when compassion and ethics guide the actions of those in positions of authority. Ashoka's legacy endures as a testament to the enduring principles of justice, kindness, and unity that transcend time and continue to shape our world today.

REFERENCES

1. Dhaky, M. A. (1997). *Ashoka's Edicts and Inscriptions*. Parimal Publications.
2. Ray, H. P. (2014). *Ashoka the Great: India's Mauryan Emperor*. HarperCollins India.
3. Thapar, R. (2012). *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Oxford University Press.
4. Smith, V. A. (2015). *Ashoka: The Buddhist Emperor of India*. Alpha Edition.
5. Dhammika, V. S. (1994). *The Edicts of King Ashoka: An English Rendering*. Buddha Dharma Education Association Inc.
6. Strong, J. S. (2007). *Relics of the Buddha*. Princeton University Press.
7. Gombrich, R. F. (1989). *Theravada Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. Routledge.
8. Jain, K. C. (2012). *Life in Ancient India as Depicted in the Jaina Canons*. Read Books Ltd.
9. Basham, A. L. (1954). *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent before the Coming of the Muslims*. Sidgwick & Jackson.
10. Sinha, N. K. (2001). *Ashoka the Great*. Academic Publishers.