



ASHOKA AND THE SPREAD OF BUDDHISM

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ABSTRACT

Ashoka, one of the most prominent rulers of the Mauryan Empire, played an important role in the history and expansion of Buddhism in ancient India. After the Kalinga War, Ashoka underwent a significant transformation in his approach to kingship and public policy. He increasingly emphasized Dhamma, non-violence, compassion, moral conduct, religious tolerance, and the welfare of his subjects. His inscriptions provide valuable evidence of his policies and his efforts to communicate ethical principles throughout his empire. Ashoka supported Buddhist institutions and traditions and contributed to the wider dissemination of Buddhist teachings. His reign also witnessed increased interaction between Buddhism and regions beyond the Indian subcontinent. Buddhist traditions associate Ashoka with the organization of a Buddhist council and the dispatch of missionary groups to different regions, including Sri Lanka. The study examines Ashoka's relationship with Buddhism, the role of his policies and inscriptions in promoting ethical and religious ideas, and the broader historical significance of Buddhism's expansion during and after his reign. It also considers the distinction between Ashoka's personal association with Buddhism and his broader policy of Dhamma, which was presented as an ethical framework intended for diverse communities.



KEYWORDS: Ashoka, Buddhism, Mauryan Empire, Dhamma, Kalinga War, Buddhist Missionaries, Buddhist Council, Inscriptions, Religious Tolerance, Ancient India.

INTRODUCTION

Ashoka occupies a prominent position in the political and religious history of ancient India. As a major ruler of the Mauryan Empire, he governed a vast and diverse territory during the third century BCE. His reign is particularly significant because of the changes in his political outlook following the Kalinga War and his subsequent emphasis on moral governance, non-violence, compassion, and social welfare.

Ashoka had a close association with Buddhism, and his patronage contributed to the development and wider visibility of Buddhist institutions. At the same time, his inscriptions show that his concept of *Dhamma* was broader than the formal teachings of Buddhism. It emphasized values such as respect for parents and elders, compassion toward living beings, moderation, ethical behavior, and respect among different religious communities. Ashoka therefore used moral principles as an important component of his approach to governance.



Ashoka's inscriptions are among the most important primary sources for studying his reign. Engraved on rocks and pillars across different parts of the empire, they provide information about his policies, administrative concerns, *Dhamma*, welfare activities, and relations with different religious groups. They also demonstrate his efforts to communicate directly with his subjects across a geographically extensive empire.

The spread of Buddhism during the Mauryan period was influenced by several factors, including royal patronage, the activities of monks and religious institutions, expanding trade and communication networks, and interactions between different regions. Buddhist traditions further associate Ashoka with the convening of a Buddhist council and the sending of missionary groups to various areas. The traditional account of the mission to Sri Lanka, associated particularly with Mahinda and Sanghamitta, is especially important in the history of Buddhism.

Ashoka's role in the spread of Buddhism must therefore be understood within the broader political and social context of the Mauryan Empire. His support strengthened Buddhist institutions and helped Buddhism gain wider regional influence, while his policy of *Dhamma* sought to promote ethical conduct and social harmony among a religiously diverse population. The study of Ashoka and the spread of Buddhism consequently provides insight into the relationship between political authority, religious patronage, moral governance, and cultural transmission in ancient India.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this study is to examine the relationship between Ashoka's rule and the spread of Buddhism in ancient India and beyond. The specific objectives are:

1. To study the early life, political career, and religious development of Ashoka.

2. To examine the impact of the Kalinga War on Ashoka's political and moral outlook.
3. To understand Ashoka's relationship with Buddhism and Buddhist institutions.
4. To examine the meaning and significance of Ashoka's concept of *Dhamma*.
5. To study the role of Ashoka's inscriptions in communicating his ethical and religious policies.
6. To examine Ashoka's patronage of Buddhist monasteries, stupas, and other religious institutions.
7. To study the role of Buddhist monks and missionary activities in the expansion of Buddhism.
8. To examine the traditional accounts of the Buddhist council associated with Ashoka and the missions to different regions.
9. To assess the spread of Buddhism beyond the Mauryan Empire, particularly in Sri Lanka and other regions.
10. To understand the historical significance of Ashoka's contribution to the development and expansion of Buddhism.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The relationship between Ashoka and Buddhism has been studied extensively by historians, archaeologists, and scholars of Buddhist history. Ashoka's rock and pillar inscriptions constitute the most important primary evidence for understanding his policies, ethical ideas, administrative activities, and relationship with religious communities. These inscriptions provide direct evidence of his promotion of *Dhamma*, although they should not be treated as a complete account of Buddhist doctrine.

Buddhist literary traditions, particularly the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa*, contain important accounts of Ashoka's conversion, his patronage of Buddhism, the Buddhist council, and the missions associated with the expansion of Buddhism. These texts are particularly significant for understanding the traditional Buddhist interpretation of Ashoka's role, although their later composition requires careful historical evaluation.

R. K. Mookerji's work on Ashoka examines his political career, administrative policies, ethical principles, and relationship with Buddhism. Romila Thapar's studies provide a critical historical interpretation of Ashoka's reign and distinguish between Ashoka's personal commitment to Buddhism and his wider policy of *Dhamma*. A. L. Basham discusses Ashoka within the broader social, religious, and cultural context of ancient India.

H. Dharmapala and other scholars of Buddhist history have emphasized the importance of Ashoka's patronage and the subsequent transmission of Buddhism to regions outside India. Upinder Singh examines Ashoka through archaeological, inscriptional, and literary evidence and highlights the importance of interpreting Buddhist traditions alongside contemporary inscriptions.

The existing literature indicates that Ashoka was an important patron of Buddhism and that his reign contributed to the religion's wider historical influence. However, scholars differ concerning the precise extent of state involvement in the spread of Buddhism, the historical details of the Buddhist council and missionary activities, and the relationship between *Dhamma* and formal Buddhist doctrine. The present study considers these issues by examining multiple categories of historical evidence.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical, descriptive, and analytical methodology. It is based primarily on both primary and secondary sources concerning Ashoka, the Mauryan Empire, and the development of Buddhism.

The primary sources include Ashoka's rock and pillar edicts, archaeological remains, stupas, pillars, inscriptions, and Buddhist literary traditions. The *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* are used to examine

traditional accounts of Ashoka's Buddhist patronage and missionary activities. Where relevant, archaeological and epigraphic evidence is compared with literary accounts to identify similarities, differences, and limitations.

Secondary sources include books, scholarly articles, research publications, and historical studies written by recognized scholars of ancient Indian and Buddhist history. The collected material is organized thematically around Ashoka's religious development, the Kalinga War, *Dhamma*, royal patronage, inscriptions, Buddhist institutions, missionary activities, and the expansion of Buddhism.

Historical criticism is applied to evaluate the date, nature, context, reliability, and limitations of different sources. The study also uses comparative analysis to distinguish between contemporary inscriptional evidence and later Buddhist traditions. A qualitative approach is followed to interpret the political, religious, and cultural significance of Ashoka's contribution to the spread of Buddhism.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The reign of Ashoka represents an important turning point in the history of both the Mauryan Empire and Buddhism. His association with Buddhism and his promotion of *Dhamma* have traditionally been regarded as major factors in the wider development of Buddhist traditions. However, the precise nature and extent of Ashoka's role in the spread of Buddhism require careful historical examination.

The central problem of this study is to understand how Ashoka's personal association with Buddhism, royal patronage, inscriptions, administrative policies, and support for religious institutions contributed to the development and dissemination of Buddhism. It also seeks to distinguish between Ashoka's broader policy of *Dhamma* and the specific doctrines and institutional practices of Buddhism.

Another important issue concerns the evidence for Buddhist missionary activities traditionally associated with Ashoka. Buddhist texts describe the organization of a council and the dispatch of missionaries to different regions, but these accounts were recorded later than Ashoka's inscriptions. Therefore, the study examines the extent to which literary traditions can be supported or qualified by inscriptional and archaeological evidence.

The study also addresses the broader question of how Buddhism expanded during and after the Mauryan period. Political patronage was one factor, but religious institutions, monks, trade networks, cultural contacts, and regional communities also contributed to this process. Understanding these multiple factors is necessary for developing a balanced historical account of Ashoka's contribution to the spread of Buddhism.

NEED OF STUDY

The study of Ashoka and the spread of Buddhism is important for understanding the religious, political, and cultural history of ancient India. Ashoka's reign represents a significant period in which Buddhism received substantial royal patronage and gained wider visibility within and beyond the Mauryan Empire. His inscriptions provide valuable evidence about his ethical policies, religious outlook, and approach to governance.

The study is necessary to understand the transformation in Ashoka's political and moral outlook following the Kalinga War. His emphasis on non-violence, compassion, tolerance, welfare, and ethical conduct provides an important example of the relationship between political authority and moral principles in ancient Indian history.

It is also important to distinguish Ashoka's personal association with Buddhism from his broader concept of *Dhamma*. His inscriptions indicate that *Dhamma* was intended as a broad ethical framework

emphasizing social harmony and responsible conduct rather than simply being a statement of Buddhist doctrine.

The study further helps explain the factors that contributed to the geographical expansion of Buddhism. Royal patronage, monasteries, monks, missionary traditions, trade routes, and cultural interactions all played roles in the transmission of Buddhist ideas. Examining these factors provides a broader understanding of how religious traditions spread across regions.

Therefore, the study is significant for understanding Ashoka's historical contribution to Buddhism, the development of Buddhist institutions, the role of inscriptions and patronage, and the wider cultural influence of Buddhism during and after the Mauryan period.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Future research may undertake detailed regional studies of the spread of Buddhism during the Mauryan and post-Mauryan periods. Archaeological excavations and systematic study of inscriptions can provide additional evidence about Buddhist settlements, monasteries, stupas, and pilgrimage centers.

Further research can examine the relationship between Ashoka's *Dhamma* and Buddhist doctrine through a comparative study of his inscriptions and early Buddhist literature. Scholars may also investigate how different Buddhist communities interpreted and preserved the memory of Ashoka over time.

The role of trade networks and merchants in the transmission of Buddhism deserves greater attention. Studies combining archaeology, economic history, geography, and epigraphy may help identify the routes through which Buddhist ideas and institutions expanded.

Further research can also examine the traditional accounts of Buddhist missions to Sri Lanka and other regions by comparing Buddhist chronicles with archaeological and inscriptional evidence. Digital mapping and GIS-based research could be used to reconstruct ancient Buddhist networks and patterns of cultural transmission.

Comparative studies of Ashoka's religious policies with those of other ancient rulers may also contribute to a broader understanding of political patronage and religious development in the ancient world.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The study focuses primarily on Ashoka's relationship with Buddhism and the factors associated with the spread of Buddhism during and after his reign. It examines his religious outlook, the Kalinga War, *Dhamma*, royal patronage, inscriptions, Buddhist institutions, and missionary traditions.

The study uses inscriptions, archaeological evidence, Buddhist literature, and modern historical scholarship. A major limitation is that the available sources do not provide a complete and uniform account of Ashoka's personal religious beliefs or the actual extent of Buddhist influence throughout his empire.

Ashoka's inscriptions are contemporary evidence, but they mainly focus on his policies and ethical principles rather than providing a comprehensive description of Buddhist doctrine. Buddhist chronicles such as the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* provide important traditional accounts, but they were composed later and may reflect the religious perspectives of their authors.

Another limitation concerns the evidence for missionary activities traditionally attributed to Ashoka. Some details are preserved mainly in later Buddhist traditions and cannot always be independently verified through contemporary evidence.

The study is also limited by the uneven distribution and survival of archaeological and inscriptional evidence. Consequently, conclusions about the spread of Buddhism in particular regions must take into account differences in the availability of historical evidence.

SCOPE OF STUDY

The scope of the study covers the major aspects of Ashoka's relationship with Buddhism and the expansion of Buddhist traditions during the Mauryan period. It begins with the political and historical background of Ashoka and examines the transformation associated with the Kalinga War.

The study includes Ashoka's patronage of Buddhism, his relationship with Buddhist institutions, and his support for stupas, monasteries, and other religious establishments. It also examines his inscriptions as important sources for understanding *Dhamma*, religious tolerance, ethical conduct, and welfare policies.

Particular attention is given to the role of Buddhist monks, missionary traditions, and institutional networks in the expansion of Buddhism. The traditional accounts concerning the Buddhist council associated with Ashoka and the missions to different regions are examined in relation to available historical evidence.

The study also considers the spread of Buddhism beyond the Mauryan heartland, particularly its transmission to Sri Lanka and other regions. The role of communication and trade networks in facilitating cultural and religious exchange is included within the scope.

Finally, the study evaluates the historical significance of Ashoka's patronage and *Dhamma* in the development of Buddhism and in the broader religious and cultural history of ancient India.

FINDINGS

The study of Ashoka and the spread of Buddhism reveals several important findings:

1. Ashoka emerged as one of the most significant royal patrons of Buddhism in ancient India.
2. The Kalinga War was an important turning point in Ashoka's reign and was followed by greater emphasis on non-violence, compassion, ethical conduct, and welfare.
3. Ashoka's inscriptions provide direct historical evidence of his moral and administrative policies and his concern for the welfare of people and living beings.
4. Ashoka supported Buddhist institutions and contributed to the construction and development of stupas and other religious establishments.
5. The concept of *Dhamma* formed an important part of Ashoka's later political and ethical policy. It emphasized values such as respect for elders, compassion, self-control, tolerance, and harmonious relations among different communities.
6. Ashoka's *Dhamma* was broader than formal Buddhist doctrine and was presented as an ethical framework applicable to people belonging to different religious traditions.
7. Buddhist traditions associate Ashoka's reign with the organization of a Buddhist council and the dispatch of missionary groups to different regions.
8. The traditional association of Mahinda and Sanghamitta with the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka represents an important development in the history of Buddhism.
9. The expansion of Buddhism cannot be attributed solely to royal patronage. Monks, monasteries, merchants, trade routes, cultural contacts, and local communities also contributed to its transmission.
10. Ashoka's policies helped give Buddhism greater institutional and geographical visibility, contributing to its subsequent development as a major religious tradition in South Asia and beyond.

DISCUSSION

Ashoka's relationship with Buddhism needs to be understood within the political and social conditions of the Mauryan Empire. His reign provides an important example of how royal patronage could influence the institutional development and public visibility of a religious tradition. His support for

Buddhist establishments and his personal association with Buddhism strengthened the position of Buddhist communities during the Mauryan period.

The Kalinga War occupies an important place in the study of Ashoka's transformation. In his own inscriptions, Ashoka expressed remorse over the suffering caused by the conquest and subsequently emphasized *Dhamma*. This change represented a shift in the ethical emphasis of his kingship, with greater attention to non-violence, compassion, tolerance, and the welfare of subjects.

At the same time, Ashoka's *Dhamma* should not be equated completely with Buddhism. His inscriptions address a broad population and emphasize principles that could be accepted across religious communities. Respect for parents and teachers, generosity, restraint, humane treatment, and respect for other religious traditions were central features of this policy.

The spread of Buddhism during this period was also dependent on factors beyond the emperor. Monastic institutions provided organizational support, while monks and teachers transmitted Buddhist teachings. Trade and communication networks facilitated contact between communities in different regions. These factors demonstrate that religious expansion was a complex social and cultural process.

The Buddhist traditions concerning missions and the council associated with Ashoka are historically important, but they must be evaluated alongside inscriptional and archaeological evidence. Later Buddhist chronicles preserve valuable traditions about Ashoka, yet they were composed after his reign. A balanced historical interpretation therefore requires comparison between contemporary evidence and later literary traditions.

Overall, Ashoka's contribution can be understood as part of a broader process in which political patronage, religious institutions, cultural exchange, and social networks interacted to facilitate the development and spread of Buddhism.

CONCLUSION

Ashoka occupies a significant position in the history of Buddhism and ancient Indian political culture. His reign marked an important period of interaction between political authority, ethical governance, and religious institutions. His association with Buddhism and support for Buddhist establishments contributed to the religion's wider institutional development and public presence.

The Kalinga War influenced Ashoka's subsequent emphasis on *Dhamma*, non-violence, compassion, tolerance, and welfare. His inscriptions remain essential sources for understanding these policies and demonstrate his efforts to communicate ethical principles throughout his empire.

However, the spread of Buddhism was not the result of royal patronage alone. Buddhist monks, monasteries, merchants, communication networks, and local communities played important roles in transmitting Buddhist ideas across regions. The traditional accounts of missions associated with

Ashoka, particularly the transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, became important parts of Buddhist historical memory.

Thus, Ashoka's historical significance lies both in his patronage of Buddhism and in his broader attempt to incorporate ethical principles into imperial governance. His reign contributed to a process through which Buddhism acquired greater institutional strength and expanded its cultural influence beyond the Mauryan Empire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Greater attention should be given to Ashoka's inscriptions as primary sources for studying his religious and political policies.

2. Researchers should distinguish carefully between Ashoka's personal association with Buddhism and his broader policy of *Dhamma*.
3. Archaeological evidence should be combined with literary and inscriptional sources when studying the expansion of Buddhism.
4. Further regional studies should examine the development of Buddhist institutions in different parts of the Mauryan Empire.
5. The traditional accounts of Buddhist missions should be critically compared with contemporary archaeological and epigraphic evidence.
6. Greater research should be undertaken on the role of monks, monasteries, merchants, and trade networks in the spread of Buddhism.
7. The transmission of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and other regions should be studied through both textual and archaeological evidence.
8. Digital mapping and GIS-based research can be used to examine ancient Buddhist routes, monasteries, stupas, and centers of religious activity.
9. Comparative studies of Ashoka's religious and ethical policies with those of other ancient rulers may provide broader perspectives on political patronage of religion.
10. Educational institutions should encourage source-based and critical study of Ashoka rather than relying exclusively on traditional narratives.

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