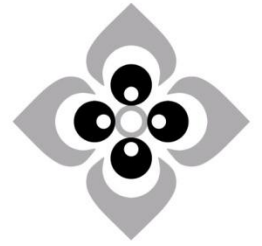


HISTORY



Subject : History
(For under graduate student)

Paper No. : Paper-I
History of India

Topic No. & Title : Topic-8
Mauryan Empire

Lecture No. & Title : Lecture-5
Asoka's Dhamma

Asoka's Dhamma

The Mauryas deserve credit for carving out a vast territorial empire, and establishing a strong, firm, administrative system at different levels, that lasted for at least a century. Yet the consolidation of this vast empire could not be achieved merely by far flung conquests and a firm administrative framework. It required something more to act as a coalescent to consolidate the elements of diversity in the empire. This necessitated an ideology that would act as an over arching principle, amidst various diversities in ethnicity,

religious beliefs, social customs, varying levels of socio economic experiences, and linguistic differences.

It was Asoka who formulated an ideology of the state, for the first time in Indian history, known as his Dhamma.

The term Dhamma figures repeatedly in Asoka's inscriptions. Regarding the meaning of this word, it may be stated that the Pali or Prakrit term Dhamma is certainly equivalent to the Sanskrit term Dharma, but cannot be translated accurately as 'religion' or as the religious belief of a person or group of persons. It is undoubtedly clear from his edicts as well as a large number of later Buddhist texts, legends, and anecdotes, that Asoka was a devout Buddhist, and that he steadfastly practiced non-violence (ahimsa) and gave up waging wars. This has led some scholars to assume that Asoka turned Buddhism into a state religion, and that his Dhamma was but a synonym of Buddhism.

In addition to the well known Buddhist legend that Asoka converted to Buddhism, he himself states in his edicts

that he became a lay follower of the creed of the Buddha, and that he was an upasaka or Buddmjkhopasaka. He also admits that for the first one and a half years after his conversion he had not striven much as an upasaka, but in the next one and half years he became more zealous in the practice of Buddhism.

Asoka's edicts state that, like a devout Buddhist he paid visits or homage to sacred places associated with Buddhism, like Lumbinigrāma, the place of the nativity of the master or Buddha, Sambodhi (modern day Bodhgaya), the place of the enlightenment of the master, and to several Buddhist stupas and viharas. He also undertook dhammayatas (dharmayatras) or tours for the sake of Dhamma, sometimes being away from his capital for as many as two hundred and fifty-six nights.

Asoka is also remembered by the famous seventh century Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, as having constructed as many as eighty-four thousand Buddhist stupas. How far these stories were factually correct is difficult to prove, but we know that Asoka had definite

concerns relating to Buddhism. In the Bairat edict he lays down as many as seven Buddhist canonical texts for the Buddhist monks and nuns to study. They were, Vinayasamukase, Aliyavasani, Anagatabhayani, Munigatha, Moneyasute, Laghulavada and Upatisapasine. This reveals that he was fully aware of, and conversant with Buddhist canonical texts. We also know from the edict at Bairat, that Asoka was perturbed at the possibility of a breakup in the Buddhist sangha, and decreed stern measures against those dissenting monks and nuns, who tried to create a division, in the sangha. All this indicates that he was a devout Buddhist in his personal religious beliefs and practices. If we add to this, the content of celebrated literary texts of a later period, like the Divyavadana, the Asokavadana, which refer to Asoka as a very pious and devoted Buddhist ruler, who arranged for the propagation of Buddhism to faraway lands, (definitely to Sri Lanka, where he is said to have sent his son and daughter for the propagation of Buddhism), it explains why he was hailed in Buddhist tradition as a 'dhammika dhammaraja' or sage-king, as well as the reason for the popular notion that Asoka was

not merely a pious Buddhist in his personal life but was actually a Buddhist ruler. In other words it implies that Asoka turned Buddhism from his personal belief into the State religion or ideology.

Stanley J Tambiah, in his book, 'The World Conqueror & World Renouncer', has argued that Dhamma was strongly embedded in Asoka's Dhamma. He does not agree with the attempt of Romila Thapar to separate Asoka's personal faith from his official policy of Dhamma.

A look at Asoka's inscriptions reveal that in spite of his allegiance to Buddhism as a personal creed, he remained completely silent in his inscriptions on some fundamental tenets of Buddhism, like the concept of the Four Noble Truths or Aryasatyas, or about the Eight Fold Path or Ashtangika Marga. He even remained completely silent on Nirvana, the ultimate goal of a Buddhist. On the other hand he emphasized the attainment of heaven, - Svarga or Swarga, in his edicts.

In the light of the debates on the nature of Asoka's Dhamma, his Aramaic and Greek edicts are significant. What figures as Dhamma in his Prakrit edicts is called Eusebia in Greek, meaning piety. The Aramaic edicts mention 'Data' which means law, and 'Qsyt' which means truth, as synonyms of Dhamma. Thus in the translation of the term Dhamma in Aramaic and Greek, no association with Buddhism is indicated. B.N.Mukherjee's studies of these edicts demonstrate that Asoka had no intention of equating Dhamma with his personal religion (Buddhism). This suggests that his concept of Dhamma was much more broad based, than popularly opined.

One of the most important ingredients of Asoka's Dhamma, was the emphasis on non-violence and avoidance of injury to other men or living beings. It was in keeping with this policy, that he stopped the beating of war drums (Bherighosha) and replaced it with the reverberation of Dhammaghosa, thereby giving up war. Another fundamental principle that he adopted was banning trips for royal hunting or viharayatra and undertaking instead, tours of piety termed dhammayatra

or dhammayata. He categorically states that earlier many animals and birds were regularly slaughtered for the royal kitchen, but that their number had been drastically reduced during his rule. He clarifies that now only two peacocks and one animal were being slaughtered daily, and that too would be stopped gradually, never claiming that slaughter had been stopped totally, which points to his truthfulness.

It is interesting to note that, in his Laghman edict (written in Aramaic), in the year sixteen since his coronation, he categorically says that he has banished those who were excessive lovers of hunting and fishing. And then again eleven years later, (in the year twenty-seven since his coronation) he put up a large list of animals and birds which were prohibited from being killed. Asoka thus implemented the policy of non-injury to living beings in several stages. The guiding principle in this case was that, one living being could not be sustained by another living being (jivena jive no pusitaviye). This again is in harmony with the institution of facilities for medical treatment for both humans and

animals, by Asoka (manusa chikichha; pasuchikichha), making it another first instance of a ruler doing so, in ancient Indian history

In his Pillar Edict II Asoka prescribes the inculcation of certain virtues for the practice of Dhamma. They are little sin (apasinave), many meritorious deeds (bahukayane), charity (dane), truthfulness (sache), kindness (daya), and purity (sochaye). To these were added the recommendation for avoiding vices like violence (chamdiye) cruelty (nithuliye), anger (kodhe), pride (mane), and jealousy (isya). Thus Dhamma appears to have consisted of practising a set of virtues, and the avoidance of certain vices, and did not have any sectarian approach, nor were typical of a particular religious belief. Asoka's stress on self-restraint (sayame), mental purity (bhavasuddhi) and gratefulness (kitanata), serve to explain that such principles were intended to cut across religious differences. The fact that Asoka's Dhamma strongly denounced the over-praising of one's own sect while denouncing that of others, marks the spirit of accommodation, and respect for plurality, and

makes it clear that there was little scope of championing any particular creed, let alone Buddhism in his ideals.

Daily life and chores were also within the purview of Dhamma. Inseparably associated with it were practices like, respectful behaviour to parents, teachers, and elders; honouring Brahmanas, Sramanas, Nirgranthas or Jains and Ajivikas, alike, and kind attitude to the weak and miserable, slaves and servants. Asoka and a later Maurya ruler Dasarath constructed rock shelters for the Ajivikas monks at Barabar caves near Gaya. One has to keep in mind that there were many instances of intense debates on philosophical and religious matters, between the Buddhists on one hand, and the Jainas and Ajivikas on the other. But that did not prevent Asoka from making arrangements for the Jains and Ajivika monks, particularly the Ajivika monks.

It is with this end in view that he specifically appointed a special class of officers Dhamma-mahamatras in-charge of the propagation of the Law of Piety. Asoka also enjoins his subjects to cultivate a kind attitude to the weak, the

miserly, slaves and servants. Therefore his policy of Dhamma emphasizes the welfare of people in general, cutting across all social barriers and sects. It was not merely directed at the propagation of Buddhist ideas.

Asoka went on to ban Samaja, a particular type of social gathering, where according to the Arthashastra, licentious behaviour, drinking, and revelry took place. He also found the performance of certain rituals (Mangalas) trivial, and prohibited them, replacing them with Dhammamangala. These ideals of Asoka were also not specific to, or typical of Buddhism. These were observed by Asoka's subjects, irrespective of their ethnic, socio-cultural and material differences.

This explains why Asoka (MRE II) perceived that Dhamma was based on age-old values, norms and codes (porana pakiti), thereby underlining the commonalities among diverse socio-cultural, ethnic, economic and religious groups. He felt that Dhamma would ensure the welfare of his subjects both in this world and the other world (hidaloka, palalokika). He even considered that the

application of Dhamma enabled him to act like a father to his subjects, whom he considered to be his children (sabe munise paja mama).

Nilakantha Sastri was the first to suggest in 1952, that Dhamma represented an ethical code of conduct placed before his subjects. This idea was further refined and elaborated by Romila Thapar, who perceived that Dhamma was largely an ethical concept related to the individual in the context of society, and that Asoka was attempting to reform the narrow attitude of religious teachings, to protect the weak against the strong, and to promote throughout the empire, a social behaviour so broad in scope, that no cultural group could object to it. Thus according to Romila Thapar, Dhamma was an ideology intended to weld a subcontinental society.

B D Chattopadhyay, in his book, 'Studying Early India' considers Asoka's Dhamma as a unifying factor, not by obliterating diversities but as an overarching principle or ideology of the state for accommodating plurality and diversity. This in turn shows that Dhamma was not

identical to Buddhism, and it was much more broad-based than a mere religion.

Recent readings into the Greek edicts of Asoka (in Kandahar), offer another dimension to the policy of Dhamma. Among the virtues to be inculcated for the practice of Eusebia (piety), Asoka says that the subjects had to 'mind the king's interests', which means that the subjects had to demonstrate firm devotion towards the ruler. The Greek Eusebia was based on Asoka's Rock Edicts XII and XIII in Prakrit where many principles of Dhamma were laid down. According to B.N. Mukherjee, the elucidation of the term in the Greek edict explains that the subjects were to show their unquestioned devotion not to a particular religious belief, but to the ruler himself (ta tou Basileos sumpheronta noi), which happens to be an elaboration of the Prakrit term 'didhabhatita' (firm devotion).

Thus firm devotion to the ruler or the interests of the ruler formed one of the component features of Asoka's Dhamma. Therefore it is not merely a social philosophy,

or only a broad based code of moral and ethical conduct; it was also a political philosophy. Asoka demanded complete allegiance from his subjects, and he in turn would act like a father to his subjects.

B.D. Chattopadhyaya views this political dimension as a unifier. In his Pillar Edict 1 Asoka makes a statement which perhaps encapsulates his ideals for the practice of Dhamma, which he says was, to maintain by Dhamma (dhammena palana), to rule according to Dhamma (dhammena vidhana), to make people happy by Dhamma (dhammena sukhiyana) and to protect people according to Dhamma (dhammena gotiti).

An important aspect of his Dhamma programme was, the sending of missions to propagate Dhamma to areas beyond his realm, to the lands of the Cholas, Pandyas, Satyaputra and Keralaputra in southern India, for which he appointed Dhammamahamatras or functionaries of high rank. No less significant is the fact that his Dhamma propagators went to Sri Lanka, and to far-flung kingdoms of five Greek rulers in West Asia and Ptolemaic Egypt.

It is true that Dhamma was a unique experiment and it was not followed in the post Asokan days but even as an experimental ideology, it did leave a lasting contribution on the Indian ethos, as something one would like to celebrate and emulate even in the present circumstances and experiences.

