

## EMPEROR AŚOKA AND BUDDHISM: SOME UNRESOLVED DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN BUDDHIST TRADITION AND AŚOKAN INSCRIPTIONS

by

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### INTRODUCTION

It was H G Wells, who, in "The Outline of History", said, "Amidst tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousnesses and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines alone, a star"<sup>1</sup>. This statement reflects a widely held appraisal of this unique personality in Indian history by the informed intelligentsia of the world. This appraisal is based in general on the numerous edicts and inscriptions through which he sought to teach his subjects a sublime moral way of life. Among these edicts, the one which has won for him the highest admiration is Rock Edict (RE) XIII, which van Buitenan describes as "*the most moving document of any dynastic history*"<sup>2</sup>

Writing not earlier than four years after the event, Emperor Aśoka portrays in this Edict the dramatic change of heart he experienced on account of the havoc of death and deportation, famine and pestilence that was caused by his war of conquest against Kālinga. The text as found at Erragudi, Girnar, Kalsi, Mansehra, Shahbazgarhi and Kandahar, runs as follows:

The country of the Kālingas was conquered by king Priyadarśi, Beloved of the Gods, eight years after his coronation. *In this war in Kālinga, men and animals numbering one hundred and fifty thousand were carried away captive from that country, as many as one hundred thousand were killed there in action, and, many times that number perished.* After that, now that the country of the Kālingas has been conquered, the Beloved of the Gods is devoted to an intense practice of the duties relating to Dharma,<sup>3</sup> to a longing for Dharma and to the inculcation of Dharma among the people. *This is due to the repentance of the Beloved of the Gods on having conquered the country of the Kālingas.*

1. H. G. Wells: *The Outline of History*, London, 1920. In his later work *A Short History of the World*, London, 1922, he devoted a chapter (xxix) to King Asoka. In it is said: "He invaded Kalinga (255 B.C.), a country on the east coast of Madras, he was successful in his military operations and - alone among conquerors - he was so disgusted by the cruelty and horror of war that he renounced it. He would have no more of it. He adopted the peaceful doctrines of Buddhism and declared that henceforth the conquests should be conquests by religion. Missionaries went from Asoka to Kashmir, to Persia, to Ceylon and Alexandria. Such was Asoka, greatest of Kings. He was far in advance of his age." pp. 94-95 (Pelican Books Special Edition 1946).
2. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th Edition, 1977) Vol. 17 p. 135.
3. In versions other than the one at Shahbazgarhi the corresponding expression reads as "zealous discussion of Dharma."

*Verily the slaughter, death and deportation of men which take place in the course of the conquest of an unconquered country are now considered extremely painful and deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods. But what is considered even more deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods is the fact that injury to or slaughter or deputation of the beloved ones falls to the lot of the Brāhmaṇas the Śramaṇas, the adherents of other sects and the householders, who live in that country and among whom are established such virtues as obedience to superior personages, obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders and proper courtesy and firm devotion to friends, acquaintances, companions and relatives of persons who are full of affection towards the former; even though they are themselves well provided for, the said misfortune as well becomes an injury to their own selves. In war, this fate is shared by all classes of men and is considered deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods.*

Now, really there is no person who is not sincerely devoted to a particular religious sect.<sup>1</sup> *Therefore, the slaughter, death or deportation of even a hundredth or thousandth part of all those people who were slain or who died or were carried away captive at that time in Kālinga is now considered very deplorable by the Beloved of the Gods.*

*Now the Beloved of the Gods thinks that, even if a person should wrong him, the offence would be forgiven if it was possible to forgive it. And the forest-folk who live in the dominions of the Beloved of the Gods even them he entreats and exhorts in regard to their duty. It is hereby explained to them that, in spite of his repentance, the Beloved of the Gods possesses power enough to punish them for their crimes, so that they should turn away from evil ways and would not be killed for their crimes. Verily the Beloved of the Gods desires the following in respect of all creatures, viz, non-injury to them, restraint in dealing with them, and impartiality in the case of crime committed by them.*

*So, what is conquest through Dharma is now considered to be the best conquest by the Beloved of the Gods. And such a conquest has been achieved by the Beloved of the Gods not only here in his own dominions, but also in the territories bordering on his dominions, as far away as at a distance of six hundred yojanas, where the Yavana king named Anti-yoka is ruling and where, beyond the kingdom of the said Antiyoka, four other kings named Turamāya, Antikini, Maka and Alikasundara are also ruling, and, towards the south where the Coḷas and Pāṇḍyas are living as far as Tāmraparṇī. Likewise here in the dominions of His*

1. This sentence appears differently in various versions. The Kalsi text reads "Excepting the country of the Yavanas, there is no country where Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas do not exist and there is no place in any country where men are not indeed sincerely devoted to one sect or another."

Majesty, the Beloved of the Gods - in the countries of the Yavanas and Kāambojas, of the Nābhakas and Nābhapanktis, of the Bhoja-paitryānikas and of the Āndhras and Paulindas - everywhere people are conforming to the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods.

Even where the envoys of the Beloved of the Gods have not penetrated, there too men have heard of the practices of Dharma and the ordinances issued and the instruction in Dharma imparted by the Beloved of the Gods, and are conforming to Dharma and will continue to conform to it.

*So, whatever conquest is achieved in this way, verily that conquest creates an atmosphere of satisfaction everywhere both among the victors and the vanquished. In the conquest through Dharma, satisfaction is derived by both the parties. But that satisfaction is indeed of little consequence. Only happiness of the people in the next world is what is regarded by the Beloved of the Gods as a great thing resulting from such a conquest.*

And this record relating to Dharma has been written on stone for the following purpose, viz., that *my sons and great-grandsons should not think of a fresh conquest by arms as worth achieving, that they should adopt the policy of forbearance and light punishment towards the vanquished even if they conquer a people by arms, and that they should regard the conquest through Dharma as the true conquest.* Such a conquest brings happiness to all concerned both in this world and in the next. And let all their intense joys be what is pleasure associated with Dharma. For this brings happiness in this world as well as in the next. (Emphasis mine).<sup>1</sup>

It also appears in a somewhat condensed version in Kandahar and its opening paragraph is as follows:

In the eighth year of his reign, Priyadarśi conquered Kālinga. One hundred and fifty thousand persons were captured there and deported from there, one hundred thousand others were killed, and almost as many perished. Since that time, pity and compassion gripped him, and he

1. Right through this paper, I have chosen to use the somewhat free and annotated translation of Aśokan lithic records by D.C. Sircar as published in his "Inscriptions of Asoka," Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi 3rd Edition (revised) 1975. On the assumption that most readers of this paper will not have ready access to texts or translations of Aśoka's inscriptions and edicts, extensive quotations are reproduced as found appropriate. Whenever required, comparisons are made with the original texts of edicts and inscriptions as presented by D.C. Sircar with Sanskritized versions in his "Select Inscriptions bearing on Indian History and Civilization," University of Calcutta, 1942, Vol. I, as well as with the texts of edicts in Nalinaksha Dutt and Krishna Datta Bajpai: *Development of Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh*, Publications Bureau, Government of Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, 1956.

was overwhelmed by that. Just as he prescribed to abstain from consuming living beings, he established zeal in the organisation of piety. And, behold, what the king was still more afflicted by: all those who inhabited that country, that Brāhmaṇas or Śramaṇas or other followers of piety as well-those who lived there had to be concerned about the interests of the king, to revere and respect their teacher and their father and mother, to love and not to deceive their friends and companions, and to treat their slaves and servants as mildly as possible - *if, from among those who were behaving there like that, one was dead or deported, other people are also indirectly affected by this, and the king is extremely afflicted by it.*

And, as with other peoples, there is no place in the country where men are not indeed sincerely devoted to one sect or another. (Emphasis mine).<sup>1</sup>

In spite of its convincing candor and tone of credibility this Edict, when analyzed vis-a-vis the plethora of legendary and literary information on Emperor Aśoka, poses a number of important issues which have baffled six to eight generations of Aśokan scholars since the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> The most significant among them relates to Aśoka's connection with Buddhism.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the evidence from all available sources with a view to ascertaining the relative veracity and reliability of the three identifiable sources of information: namely, (i) the Theravāda tradition as recorded in Pali in the Chronicles and the commentarial literature of Sri Lanka:<sup>3</sup>. (ii) the Mahāyāna tradition as preserved in Sanskrit, Chinese

1. This extract is from a fragmentary inscription in Greek presenting a condensed adaptation of RE XII and XIII. It was found at Kandahar in 1963.
2. Apart from such pioneers as Prinsep, Cunningham, Buhler, Senart and Hultzsch and Bloch whose contribution was mainly in exploring or deciphering and interpreting the archaeological and epigraphical data on Aśoka, many scholars have produced monographs; the following are particularly helpful in assessing the development of Aśoka studies: Vincent A. Smith: *Asoka* (3rd edition, Oxford 1920); Jean Przyluski: *La Légende de l'Empereur Asoka* (Paris, 1923); James M. Mcphail: *Asoka* (The Heritage of India Series, revised edition, YMCA, Calcutta, 1951); D. R. Bhandarkar: *Asoka* (3rd edition, Calcutta, 1955), Radha Kumud Mookerjee: *Asoka* (3rd edition, Delhi, 1955); Amulyachandra Sen: *Asoka's Edicts* (Delhi, 1956) and Romila Thapar: *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryās*, Delhi 1961. The most comprehensive of the monographs on Aśoka is Beni Madhab Barua's *Asoka and His Inscriptions* Parts I and II (New Age Publishers, Calcutta, 2nd edition, 1955).
3. The Sri Lankan Pali sources consist of *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa*, the introduction to *Samantapāsādikā* by Buddhaghosa and *Mahāvāṃsa-Tīkā*, all of which have drawn heavily from the Sinhala commentaries which became extinct after their translation and adaptation in Pali by Buddhaghosa and others, Cf. Wilhelm Geiger: *The Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa and Their Historical Development in Ceylon*, Government Press, Colombo 1908, p. 58: "The founding of the Buddhist church in Ceylon forms the most important subject of the first of the Mahāvāṃsa. The author has here completely exhausted his source. Nowhere do the Mahāvāṃsa and Dīpavaṃsa agree so entirely as in this place. Both works reproduce the *Aṭṭhakathā* almost exactly."

and Tibetan literary works and records<sup>1</sup> and (iii) over two hundred lithic records which the Emperor had caused to be inscribed on rock faces, pillars and caves<sup>2</sup> all over his far-flung empire. In order to avoid the most distasteful display of unmitigated personal prejudices which had characterized the writings of several Aśokan scholars of the past,<sup>3</sup> no one source will be considered *prima facie* to be more reliable than another.

This rigour will be applied with equal care to the lithic records in spite of the obvious temptation to assign them a higher degree of reliability on grounds of either contemporaneity with the protagonist or immutability in transmission. A lesson learnt specially from the epigraphical extravagances of Nissankamalla in Sri Lankan history<sup>4</sup> is that inscriptions *per se* are no more reliable than other sources of historical information. On the contrary, they could even be more misleading.

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1. Divyāvadāna and Aśokāvadāna (Chinese version: A-yu-wang-tchuan) as well as the accounts of the travels of Fa Hsian, Hieun-Tsang and I-tsing constitute the main Mahāyāna sources of information on Aśoka. Apart from the Purāṇas, where Aśoka's name occurs in geneological lists of the Mauryan Dynasty, the only Hindu sources of India to mention him is the Kashmirian chronicle Rājatarangaṇi. The information is garbled and hence not reliable; for a discussion on the relative validity of different sources see my article "Emperor Aśoka's place in History" in the Journal of the Buddhist and Pali University. Vol. I No.1.
  2. Lithic records of Aśoka, hitherto discovered, are classified as Minor Rock Inscriptions (4 texts) Rock Edicts (16 texts) Cave Inscriptions (3 texts) Minor Pillar Inscriptions (2 texts) Pillar Inscriptions (2 texts) Pillar Edicts (7 texts). Some among these 34 main texts are found in many versions. With repetitions, over 200 inscriptions have so far been found, the latest being the Greek adaptation of RE XII and RE XIII discovered at Kandahar in Afghanistan in 1963.
  3. For example, Vincent A. Smith rejected the Sri Lankan Pali sources using such expressions as "the silly fictions of mendacious monks", "tales told by monkish romancers," "grotesque and contradictory", "overlaid with superstitious imbecilities and distorted by sectarian and ecclesiastical bias", "a tissue of absurdities", "elaborately falsified Chronicles of Ceylon" and "not of doubtful authority but positively false". Reviewing his "Aśoka", Anagarika Dharmapala said in 1906 "Notwithstanding his malignant attacks on Ceylon Chronicles we are grateful to Mr. Smith for the service he has rendered to the cause of oriental research in having compiled the two works 'Aśoka, the Buddhist Emperor' and the 'Early History of India': Return to Righteousness, edited by me, Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, Colombo, 1965 p. 784. Rhys Davids was specially even-handed: not only did he say that "No hard words are needed: and we may be unfeignedly grateful to these students and writers for having preserved as much as we can gather from their imperfect records" but also chastized the critics of Sri Lankan Chronicles adding "It may be human to kick down the ladder by which one has just climbed up. But we need not do so, in this case, with too great violence. We may want it again. And it jars upon the reader to hear the Chronicles called the mendacious fictions of unscrupulous monks. Such expressions are inaccurate: and they show a grave want of appreciation of the points worth considering." Rhys Davids: *Buddhist India*, London, 1902, pp.274-275.
  4. Senerat Paranavitana: *Ceylon and Malaysia*, Lake House Investments, Colombo, 1966 pp. 71 and 113.

The questions for which we shall seek answers will be the following:

1. Was Aśoka converted to Buddhism? If so, when and by whom?
2. What role did the Kālinga war play in either his conversion to Buddhism or the change of his imperialist policy?
3. How consistent were his statements in edicts and inscriptions in terms of time and place?
4. Was he actually involved in the propagation of Buddhism within and outside his empire?

## II. CONVERSION OF AŚOKA TO BUDDHISM

According to Joseph M. Kitagawa, the rulers of kingdoms and republics of north-east India extended their patronage to "heteropax sects" (i.e. unorthodox sects when viewed from the Vedic or Brahmanical standpoint) as "one way of avoiding the meddling of Brahmans (high caste Hindus) in the affairs of state."<sup>1</sup> While more evidence will be needed before one accepts this view *into*, to the fact remains that Aśoka's ancestors were associated with Jains and Ajivakas according to both tradition and literary sources.

The founder of the Mauryan dynasty, Candragupta, was in all probability propelled to and sustained in power by the Brahman political theoretician Viṣṇugupta Cānakya Kauṭilya, reputedly the author of Arthaśāstra. But the Jain tradition asserts that he abdicated the throne, adopted the life of a Jain ascetic and fasted to death at Śravaṇa Belgola near Mysore. As regards the religious affiliations of his son, Bīndusāra, the Sri Lankan Buddhist records portray him as a devotee of Brahmanism - providing alms to 60,000 Brahmans daily at Pataliputra. According to Greek sources, he had appealed to the Seleucid king of Syria, Antiochus I, for a Greek philosopher to instruct him. Bīnduāara's wife, Dharmā—the mother of Aśoka - is mentioned in Buddhist sources as a devotee of Ājivakas and her family preceptor is named in Pali sources as Janāsaṇa (Jarāsaṇa, Jarāsoṇa) and in Sanskrit sources as Pingalavatsa. Aśoka, too, dedicated at least two caves to the Ājivakas in the twelfth year from his coronation.<sup>2</sup>

What becomes very clear from these records is that at this particular time in India - and possibly even in Sri Lanka where Paṇḍukābhaya had built them a residence<sup>3</sup>—the Ājivakas constituted a strong vibrant religious movement. It is stated in Buddhist sources that, when Aśoka was disenchanted with the

1. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, op. cit. Vol. II p. 406.

2. Cave Inscriptions I and II at Sudama and Visa Jhopri caves on the Barabar hills.

3. *Mahāvamśa* X, 102.

Brahmans whom he supported in continuation of his father's practice, and sought for new religious guidance, the saints and teachers whom the Emperor's men could summon were Ājīvakas, Jains and Paṇḍaranga Parivrājakas. Sri Lankan Vinaya Commentary, Samantapāsādikā,<sup>1</sup> states emphatically that for three years after his coronation, Aśoka was a follower of other sects (bāhirakapāsaṇḍa - non-Budhistic).

Neither tradition nor literary sources associate Buddhism with either Candragupta or Bindusāra, even though an effort had been made to trace the genealogy of Mauryas to the kinsmen of the Buddha, the Śākya. Thus the first Maurya emperor to come under the influence of Buddhism or to support Buddhist institutions was Aśoka.

The fact that Aśoka embraced Buddhism and gave Buddhist institutions his special patronage and support is no longer debated. Even if tradition and literary sources are discounted, the following inscriptions leave no more room for doubt:

- (i) *Minor Rock Edict (MRE) I* (available in 13 versions): "A little more than two years and a half have passed since *I have been avowedly a lay follower (upāsaka) of the Buddha*. It is now more than a year since *the Saṅgha has been intimately associated with me (saṅghe upayāte)* and I have been exerting myself in the cause of Dharma."
- (ii) *Same MRE (Ahraura version)*: "This declaration has been made by me while I am on a tour of pilgrimage for 256 nights since *the relics to the Buddha ascended the platform (i.e. were caused to be installed by me on the platform for worship)*."
- (iii) *MRE III, a unique text found only in a single version at Bairat (Bhabur) and now at the Indian Museum, Calcutta:*

King Priyadarśī of Magadha salutes the monks of the Saingha, wishes them good health and comfort in their movement, and addresses them in the following words.

It is known to you, Venerable Sirs, *how far my reverence for and faith in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha. Whatever, Venerable Sirs, has been said by the Lord Buddha, is well said.* But, Venerable Sirs, I deem it proper to speak out what appears to me the way as to how the true Dharma may be of long duration.

I desire, Venerable Sirs, that the largest number of monks and and nuns should constantly listen to and reflect on the following which are the texts of Dharma:

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1. Samantapāsādikā (PTS) I.p 44.

*Vinayasamutkarshah* or the Exaltation of Discipline;  
*Āryavasah* or the Noble States of Living;  
*Anagatabhayani* or the Fears to Come;  
*Minigatha* or the Song of the Hermit;  
*Mauneyasūtram* or the Discourse on the State of a Hermit;  
*Upātishyaprasnāh* or the Question of Upatishya; and  
*Rahulovavādah* or the Exhortation to Rāhula which was delivered  
 by the Lord on the subject of falsehood.

*In the same way, the lay followers of the Buddha, both male and female, should listen to and reflect on the sacred texts.*

This record, Venerable Sirs, is caused to be written by me for the following purpose, viz., that people may know my intention (Emphasis mine).

(iv) *RE VIII (in seven versions)*

“Now King Priyadarsī, Beloved of the Gods, visited Sambodhi (i.e. the Scared Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya) ten years after his coronation. Thence started these pilgrimages for Dharma.”

(v) *Minor Pillar Edict (MPE) I (Allahabard - Kosambi text)*

This is the order of the Beloved of the Gods. The Mahāmātras stationed at Kauśambi are to be addressed in the following words.

*I have made both the Saṅgha of the monks and the Saṅgha of the nuns united. No heretical monk should be admitted into the Saṅgha. Whosoever, be it a monk be it a nun, shall break up the unity of the Saṅgha should be made to wear white robes unworthy of the order and to reside in what is not fit for the residence of a recluse.*

(vi) *MPE I (Sanchi text)*

*You should act in such a way that the Saṅgha cannot be divided by any heretical monk. Both the Saṅgha of the monks and the Saṅgha of the nuns have each been made by me a united whole to last as long as my sons and great-grandsons shall reign and the moon and the sun shall shine.*

*The monk or nun who shall break up the Saṅgha should be made to put on white robes and to reside in what is not fit for the residence of recluse.*

*For my desire is that the Sangha may remain united and flourish for a long time.*



(vii) *MPE I and II (Saranth text)*

*You should act in such a way that the Saṅgha cannot be divided by anyone. But verily that monk or nun, who shall break up the Saṅgha, should be compelled to put on white robes and to reside in what is unfit for the residence of a recluse. Thus should this order be communicated to the Saṅgha of the monks as well as to the Saṅgha of the nuns.*

Thus saith the Beloved of the Gods.

One copy of the above document has been deposited in your office, so that it would be accessible to you. *And deposit ye another copy of this very document so as to make it accessible to the lay followers of the Buddha.* Now, the lay followers should assemble near the document every fast day in order to be inspired with faith on account of this very edict. (Emphasis mine).

In these lithic records we have the assertion of Aśoka himself that he began as a lay follower of the Buddha; that after about a year and a half of uncommitted adherence, he developed a closer association with monks and began to exert himself in the cause of the Dharma; that he admired the teachings of the Buddha and had identified his own favourite texts which he recommended to the clergy as well as to the laity; and that he played a leading role, through his new administrative machinery of Dharmamahāmātras, to prevent schisms in the Buddhist Saṅgha.

**III. WHEN, HOW AND BY WHOM ?**

But the questions which remain yet to be solved are: *when, how and by whom* was Aśoka converted to Buddhism ?

According to the Sri Lankan Pali sources, Aśoka embraced Buddhism in the fourth year from his coronation. The Sanskrit sources are however not so specific. But both depict the early years of Aśoka as rough, harsh and violent. The Pali sources speak of his wars of succession against 99 of his hundred brothers. But Sanskrit Divyāvadāna not only elaborates the ugly appearance and fierce nature of Aśoka and presents a grotesque and gruesome episode of how he converted his royal pleasance into a place of terror, horror, oppression and tragic deaths of the unwary visitors and passers-by through his agent Caṇḍagirika,<sup>1</sup> but also attributes to Aśoka the beheading of 500 ministers with his own sword and the burning to death of 500 court ladies. The Chinese Aśokāvadāna resorts to higher levels of poetical imagination in representing Aśoka in a most wicked character. These accounts of Aśoka prior to his

1. B.M. Barua: loc. cit. p, 23.

conversion had prompted Aśokan scholars to consider them as the results of a tendency among Buddhist writers to 'paint his character as black as possible in the days before his conversion so that he should appeal all the more powerfully to the world as a miracle of grace.'<sup>1</sup>

The Sri Lankan Pali records, which according to Beni Madhab Barua cannot but appear to be comparatively more realistic and reliable, *chronologically sounder* and nearer the truth,<sup>2</sup> have restricted the wicked past of Aśoka's life to his wars of succession which must have extended for nearly four years (i.e. the interval between his succession and his coronation).

The story of Aśoka's conversion according to these sources has hardly any dramatic element. The early years after his coronation are portrayed uneventful and conservative. The only thing which seemed to have disturbed him in this humdrum life was the behaviour of the Brahmans who received his alms daily. His reaction was to look for some saintly teachers. His courtiers and officers produced their favourite teachers from among Ājīvakas and Nigaṇṭhas. But the emperor was unimpressed. It was by accident that he saw the young Buddhist monk, Nyagrodha, to whom he took a liking and from whom he heard a sermon on heedfulness (Appamāda). Uttering the traditional formula of seeking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha, he became a Buddhist upāsaka. He began to frequent the local Buddhist temple called Kukkuṭārāma at Pataliputra and there met the learned elder, Moggaliputta Tissa. From him, the emperor learned of the division of the Buddha's teachings into 84,000 sections and decided to construct as many Buddhist vihāras in his empire - a project he completed in three years. Although he had shown utmost munificence to Buddhist institutions, he was still considered a giver of requisites. To be an inheritor of the religion (*Sāsanadāyādin*), one's offspring had to be ordained in the Saṅgha. This too, was achieved in the sixth year after coronation when Mahinda and Sanghamittā entered the Saṅgha.<sup>3</sup>

Now comes the problem of reconciling the dates of the Sri Lankan Pali sources with those of Aśoka's own inscriptions. In Pillar Edict (PE) VI (found in five versions), which was caused to be written in the twenty-sixth year after the coronation, it is said:

*Twelve years after my coronation, records relating to Dharma were caused to be written by me for the first time for the welfare and happiness of the people so that, without violation thereof, they might attain the growth of Dharma in various respects., (Emphasis mine).*

1. J.M. Macphail: loc. cit; p. 19.

2. B.M. Barua: .loc; cit; p.23.

3. For a comprehensive account which draws from the Sri Lankan Pali sources, see Gunapala Malalasekera: *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Indian Texts Series, London 1937 s.v. Asoka.

Though not specifically dated, the references made in the opening sentence to the period 2-1/2 years during which Aśoka had been a lay follower of Buddhism have been relied upon to establish MRE I (found in 14 versions) to be earliest of his inscriptions hitherto discovered.<sup>1</sup> If this MRE is therefore dated 12 years after coronation Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism (or in his own words, becoming avowedly a lay follower of the Buddha), which had taken place a little more than two and half years ago has to be dated between the eighth and the ninth year after his coronation. This date fits perfectly with the period of remorse and repentance following the Kālinga war as so eloquently and movingly described in RE XIII. It also fits the two events dated in the inscriptions in the tenth year after coronation: namely, his pilgrimage to the sacred Bodhi tree (RE VIII) and the commencement of his role as the teacher of Dharma (MRE IV found in Greek and Aramaic near Kandahar): Ten years having passed since his coronation, King Priyadarai has been showing piety- *eusebeia*- to the people (Greek) and Ten years having passed, it so happened that our lord, King Priyadarsi, became the institutor of Truth (Aramaic).

If we had just one source of information - either the literary sources or the inscriptions - there would have been no problem. Nor would there be a difficulty if one accepts either one of these sources and rejects or ignores the other. It is obviously difficult to reject or ignore the inscriptions. The early Aśokan scholars were quick to reject the literary sources in general. But the indispensability of the Sri Lankan Pali sources for even the identification of Aśoka with Priyadarsi of the inscriptions, on the one hand, and for interpreting the names and places engraved on reliquaries of Tope No. 2 of Sanchi group and Tope No. 2 of Sonari group, on the other, establishes their reliability beyond any doubt. Hence, the need to delve deeper into where the two sources of information disagree.

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1. The Gujarra text of this MRE is slightly modified. It begins as follows: "I have now been a lay follower of the Buddha for two and a half years. . . . . It is now more than a year since the Sangha has been intimately associated with me and I have been exerting myself in the cause of Dharma. . ."
  2. Rhys Davids: *American Lectures*, p. 6—quoted also in *Buddhist India* p. 273: "It is not too much to say that without the help of the Ceylon books the striking identification of the King Priyadassi of the inscriptions with the King Aśoka of history would never been made. Once made, it rendered subsequent steps comparatively easy; and it gave to Prinsep and his coadjutors just that encouragement and element of certainty which were needed to keep their enthusiasm alive." Cf. also J.R. Jayewardene: *Buddhist Essays*, 5th edition, Government Press, Colombo 1983p. 39.

## IV. MAJOR DISCREPANCIES IN EVENTS AND DATES

As we have seen above, the events relating to Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism and his involvement in the promotion of *Dharma* (as he called it in his inscriptions) and *Buddhadhamma* (as Buddhist sources specify) have been differently described and dated in the literary sources and the inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> The discrepancies become clear when the data from the two sources are tabulated as below.

YEAR AFTER CORONATION	INFORMATION FROM SRI LANKAN PALI SOURCES	INFORMATION FROM AŚOKAN INSCRIPTIONS
4th	Conversion by Nyagrodhs	
5th - 7th	Construction of 84,000 Vihāras	
6th	Mahinda becomes a monk under Moggaliputta Tissa and Sanghamittā becomes a nun	
6th	Aśoka intervenes in the suspension of ecclesiastic actions of the Sangha	
8th		Kālinga War followed by remorse repentance (RE XII)
9th - 10th		Lay follower of the Buddha but without much exertion (MRE I)
10th		Pilgrimage to sacred Bodhi Tree (RE VIII) Begins teaching the Dharma to the people (Greek/Aramaic versions of MRE IV) Provides in bordering territories (Choḍa, Pāṇḍya, Sātiyaputra, Kerala, Tamraparṇi, Greek kingdom of Antiyoka and territorie adjoining it) medical treatment for human beings and animals, grows medicinal herbs there; digs wells and plants trees along the roads (RE IV)
10th or 11th		Sanghe upayāte: close association with the Saṅgha (MRE I) Tour of the empire lasting 256 days (MRE I)
12th		Beginning of the practice of inscribing edicts for the propagation of Dharma Orders Rajjukas and Pradesikas to set out on circuits every five years both for inspection and for the special purpose of preaching Dharma (RE III)
13th		Creates the post of Dharmama-hāmātra (RE V)
14th		Enlargement of the Stūpa of Buddha Kankamuni (PI II)

1. Wilhelm Geiger: *The Mahāvamsa*, Ceylon Government Press Information Department, Colombo 1950 pp. XIX-XX.

YEAR AFTER CORONATION	INFORMATION FROM SRI LANKAN PALI SOURCES	INFORMATION FROM ASOKAN INSCRIPTIONS
17th	Gets concerned over indiscipline and laxity in the Sangha; commences the purification of the Sangha, which results in the Third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra under the presidency of Moggaliputta Tissa	
18th	Sends missions to propagate Buddhism: Mahinda to Sri Lanka, Majjhantika to Kashmir and Gandharas; Mahādeva to Mahisamañḍala (Mysore?); Rakkhita to Vanāvāsa; Dharmarakkhita the Greek to Aparantaka (i.e. Western India); Mahādhammarakkhita to Mahārāshtra; Mahārakkhita to the Greek country; Majjhima to the Himālayas; Soṇa and Uttara to Suvaṇṇabhūmi (Lower Burma and Thailand?)	
19th	Sanghamitta sent to Sri Lanka with a sapling of the sacred Bodhi Tree to found the Order of Nuns	Donates the Khalatika Cave to ascetics to enable them to live above the flood level during rainy season
20th		Pilgrimage to Lumbini, the place where the Buddha was born (PI I) Pilgrimage to the Stūpa of Buddha Kanakamuni (PI II)
26th	Death of Moggaliputta Tissa	Writing of Pillar Edict IV and V Pillar Inscription
27th		Writing of Pillar Edict VII (the last of his dated inscriptions)
29th	Death of Queen Ansadhimittā	
32nd	Elevation of Tissarakkhā to rank of queen	
34th	Tissarakkhā caused the sacred Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gaya to be destroyed on account of jealousy	
37th	Death of Aśoka	

The central issues before the historical analyst are: (i) why Aśoka was silent on Nyagrodha and Moggaliputta Tissa (or, according to Sanskrit Buddhist sources, Samudra and Upagupta) and why the Buddhist sources make no reference whatsoever to the Kālinga war and its emotional impact on Aśoka? (ii) does this mutual exclusion minimize the reliability of either or both sources? and (iii) whether the conversion to Buddhism preceded or followed this war?

One of the earliest scholars to be curious about the impression which Aśoka has created to the effect that his spiritual progress was this own doing throughout,<sup>1</sup> was T. W. Rhys Davids. His assessment of the evidence of Sri Lankan Pali sources was: "I am not prepared to say, though their evidence is so much later, there may not be some truth in their view." Thus implicitly assigning Aśoka's contact with the Sangha a date anterior to the Kalinga war he concluded:

"But, it is so very likely that one factor at least in the king's change of heart may have been the exhortation or conversation of one or other of the Arahats, that *we may suppose both accounts to have been right*"<sup>2</sup> (Emphasis mine).

More specific was James M. Macphail. To him, the conversion of Aśoka has preceded the Kalinga war. He argued as follows:

It is not easy to understand why Aśoka, the head of a great military empire that had been acquired in no very remote time by conquest, should have been so deeply affected and conscience-stricken by his experience of of what were in those days familiar horrors of war. *There must surely have been some preparation for so great a change.* Possibly the teaching of the followers of Gautama had impressed him more than he had himself realized, and the experience of actual bloodshed on a large scale, merely to gratify ambition and enrich the State, served to crystallize into convictions impressions that had been slowly forming in his mind."<sup>3</sup> (Emphasis mine).

The issues listed above arise simply because Aśoka had not stated how and when he came in contact with Buddhism. The confusion among most scholars had arisen because RE XIII has been generally interpreted as an account of Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> Such an interpretation accords with the popular concept of significant psychological change following from a telling occurrence in a person's life (e.g. the sight of the sick, the old, the dead and the ascetic, which turned the Buddha on his way to renunciation). A very careful scrutiny of this Edict in comparison with MRE I would show that it is the latter which described his conversion to Buddhism rather than the former. What RE XIII recounts is Aśoka's intense emotional experience which prompted him to change his policy of *dig-vijaya* (i.e. imperialist

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1. Rhys Davids: *Buddhist India* p. 284. His interpretation of a three-stage progress in Aśoka's spiritual development is no longer accepted, as the Abhisambodhi that he visited ten years after coronation is now recognized as the sacred Bodhi Tree at Buddha Gayā.
  2. Ibid. p. 284.
  3. Macphail: loc. cit. p. 32.
  4. M. Barua: loc. cit. p. 33.

expansion as enjoined as a major duty of a king according to the Hindu Dharmasastras)<sup>1</sup> to *dharma-vijaya* or conquest through righteousness. The purpose of this Edict was specific: that was to dissuade his sons and grandsons from resorting to conquest by arms:

.....that they should regard conquest through Dharma (Dharmavijaya) as the true conquest. Such a conquest brings happiness to all concerned both in this world and in the next.

In Aśoka's own words, the effect of the Kalinga war on himself was as follows:

Now that the country of the Kalingas had been conquered, the Beloved of the Gods is devoted to an intense practice of the duties relating to Dharma, (*or*, according to other versions of the Edict, zealous discussion of Dharma, to a longing for Dharma and to the inculcation of Dharma among the people. This is due to the repentance of the Beloved of the Gods on having conquered the country of the Kalingas.)

There is an interesting drafting point which may usefully be analyzed. The timing for Aśoka's involvement with Dharma is expressed in Prakrit as 'Tato paca adhuna ladhesu kaligesu' (Shahbazgarhi text) or 'Tato paccha adhuna ladesha kaligyesu' (Kalsi text). This special grammatical construction in Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit, called the locative absolute, is used to express not merely a sequence in time (i.e. when such a thing was done.....) but more emphatically a 'conditioning or accompanying circumstance'<sup>2</sup> (i.e. *now that* it has been done...). What the text with this syntactical form conveys is that the annexation of Kalinga was an obligation or even a pre-requisite which had to be fulfilled. Whether it was necessitated by royal duties as conceived at the time or by demands of national security, Aśoka had to do it. It was only after that he could devote himself to the Dharma. Of course, the miseries which his war perpetrated convinced him how wrong the pursuit of armed conquest was.

Such an interpretation of the Edict on the strict analysis of Aśoka's choice of words and grammatical form would certainly take away much of the dramatic effect which popular interpretations would assign to the Kālinga war. But it confirms that the information on Aśoka's conversion - specially the data as given in Sri Lankan Pali sources—could be accurate.

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1. The conquest of directions as the term literally means, is closely linked to the Aśvamedha sacrifice. Two epigraphically recorded dig-vijayas in historical times are those of the Jain King Khāravela (circa 25-5 B.C. - Hathigumpha Cave Inscription) and Gupta Emperor Samudragupta (Circa 330-375 A.D. - Allahabad Stone Pillar Inscription).
  2. William D. Whitney: *Sanskrit Grammar*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1941, p. 102.

## V. HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF ROCK EDICT XIII

The third question for which an answer is sought in this paper is: How consistent were Aśoka's statements in terms of time and place? This question is raised in relation to RE XIII itself, whose central theme is the conquest of Kālinga, the remorse and repentance it caused in Aśoka and the consequent change in his military or foreign policy. So far, as many as eight versions (including a condensed Greek version) have been found in such far-flung places as Afghanistan (2 copies), Pakistan (2 copies), Andhra Pradesh, Gujerat, Uttar Pradesh (near Dehra Dun), Mahārāshtra (near Bombay) — but not a single version in or near Kālinga itself. There must be a special reason for it.

This would be, on the face of it, rejected as an *argumentum e silentio*. But that is not so in this particular case.

The series of fourteen Rock Edicts (RE I - XIV) appears in exact sequence in identical words (with very minor modifications) in the eight sites mentioned above. There are two similar series of Rock Edicts in Jaugada and Dhauri in Orissa, that is in ancient Kālinga. They differ from the rest in one major and most significant factor.

The crucial Rock Edict XIII which expresses Aśoka's heart-felt repentance on the miseries he caused to the people of Kālinga is missing, along with Rock Edicts XI and XII. If these three Edicts were simply dropped from the series, it could have been explained as an omission by the scribes. What strikes our attention is that in their place two other Edicts have been inserted which are specifically addressed to the Mahāmāṭras stationed at Samāpa and Tosali.

There is, of course, the explanation which Aśoka had himself given in RE XIV. By way of explaining the possible variations in text and contents, he says:

“In the series of records, there, forsooth, are texts written in a concise form, or in a medium form, or in an elaborate form. And *all the items of the series have not been put together in all places*. For my dominions are wide, and much has been written, and I shall certainly cause still more to be written.

*There are some topics which have been repeated over and over again owing to their sweetness, so that people may act accordingly. There may be some topics, which have been written incompletely either as the particular place of a record was considered unsuitable for them or as a special reason for abridgement was believed to exist, and also owing to a fault of the scribe.”* (Emphasis mine)



According to this, the only reason for omitting RE XIII could have been that Aśoka considered its contents unsuitable for the people of Kālinga. Then arises the question: why? Was there any reason why Aśoka had to keep away from his Kālingan subjects that he repented the havoc he created there or that it was that war which changed his entire imperialist policy?

There is no doubt room for a sneaking suspicion that there is something very strange if Aśoka considered the contents of RE XIII to be unsuitable for his subjects in Kālinga at either Jaugada or Dhauri. What exactly is it that he did not want them to know. The number of casualties? His repentance? Or the "softening" of his militaristic policy?

These are about the only sensitive matters which could have influenced his decision unless, of course, one can, even most reluctantly, conceive of an extreme case of inexactitude on the part of Aśoka and conclude that the whole episode on the Kālinga war and its consequences was more imaginary than real. It would then be only an attractive story, presented in vivid colour, to impress those who were far removed from the scene both by distance and time and hence unable to verify its truth or accuracy. That would be to say that Aśoka could not possibly tell the Kālingas of a war that did not take place or whose results and extent of damage were different. In spite of the richness of details and the general historical reliability of the Buddhist literary sources in both Pali and Sanskrit, they are altogether silent on a Kālinga episode. As far as they are concerned, such a war had not been responsible for the conversion of Aśoka, the Wicked, to Aśoka, the Righteous.

To be more certain, one should take a closer look at the two texts which replaced RE XI-XIII in Kālinga. The full texts are as follows:

RE XV: "Thus saith the Beloved of the Gods.

The following royal order has to be addressed to the *Mahāmātras* stationed at *Sāmāpa*.

As regards whatever good I notice, I desire that I may carry it out by deeds and accomplish it by proper means. And I consider the following to be the principal means to this end, viz., to impart instruction to you.

*All men are my children.* Just as, in regard to my own children, I desire that they may be provided by me with all kinds of welfare and happiness in this world and in the next, the same I desire in respect of all men.

The following question may occur to the people of the unconquered territories lying beyond the borders of my dominions: "What is the king's desire in respect of us? The following alone is my wish which should be

realized by *the peoples living on the borders*, viz., that the king desires that they should be unworried on his account, that they would have confidence in him, and that they should expect of him only happiness and no misery. The following also should be realized by them viz., that the king will forgive them in respect of any offence that is pardonable. My desire is that they should practise the duties associated with Dharma for my sake and that they should attain happiness in this world as well as in the next.

Now, I instruct you for the following purpose., viz., *that I may free myself from the debt I owe to the people inhabiting the lands beyond the borders of my dominions* by having instructed you and informed you of my will as well as my unshakable resolution and vow.

Therefore, acting accordingly, you should perform your duties. You should also inspire *the people of the bordering lands with confidence in me*, so that they might realize that the king is to them even as their father, that he sympathises with them even as he sympathises with his own self, and that they are to the king even as his own children.

Having instructed you and informed you of my will as well as my unshakable resolution and vow, *I feel that my appeal to you in this respect will be known to the people of the whole country. Indeed you are capable of inspiring them with confidence in myself* and securing their welfare and happiness in this world and in the next. And, by so doing, you will attain heaven and discharge the debt you owe to me.

So, this record has been written here on stone for the following purpose, viz., that the Mahāmātras should strive to do their duty at all times in order *to inspire the people living on the borders of my dominions with confidence in me and to induce them to practise the duties associated with Dharma.*

Therefore, all of you should listen to this record read out on every Chāturmasī day as well as on the day of the Tishyā constellation. You may also listen to it on other days between two Tishyā days. Some of you may listen to it even on any other occasion as it presents itself. And, by so doing, you will be able to accomplish your duties. (Emphasis mine).

RE XVI: The Mahāmātras of Tosali, who are the judicial officers of the city, have to be addressed in the following words of the Beloved of the Gods:

As regards whatever good I notice, I desire that I may carry it out by deeds and accomplish it by proper means. And I consider the following to be the principal means to this end, viz., to impart instruction to you. For you are placed by me over many thousands of beings with the object *that I may gain the affection of all men.*

*All men are my children.* Just as, in regard to my own children, I desire that they may be provided with all kinds of welfare and happiness in this world and in the next, the same I desire also in regard to all men. But you do not understand how far my intention goes in this respect. A few amongst you perchance understand it: but even such of you understand it partly and not fully. Howsoever well placed you may be, you have to pay attention to this matter.

*In the administration of justice, it sometimes happens that some persons suffer imprisonment or harsh treatment. In such cases, a person may accidentally obtain an order cancelling his imprisonment, while many other persons in the same condition continue to suffer for a long time. In such a circumstance, you should so desire as to deal with all of them impartially.*

But an officer fails to act impartially owing to the following dispositions, viz., jealousy, anger, cruelty, hastiness, want of perseverance, laziness and fatigue. Therefore, you should desire that these dispositions may not be yours. And the root of the complete success of an officer lies in the absence of anger and avoidance of hastiness. In the matter of administration of justice, an officer does not get up for work if he is fatigued: but he has to move, to walk and to advance. Whoever amongst you pays attention to this should tell other officers: "Pay attention to nothing except the duties assigned to you by the king. Such and such are the instructions of the Beloved of the Gods." The observance of this duty will produce great results for you; but its non-observance will produce great harm. For, if you fail to observe this, there will be for you neither the attainment of heaven nor the attainment of the king's favour. Because indifferent observance of this duty on your part cannot make me excessively energetic in favouring you. If, however, you observe this duty, you will attain heaven and also discharge the debt you owe to me, your master.

And all of you should listen to this record read out on the day of the Tishyā constellation. Some of you may listen to it also on other suitable occasions on any day between two days of Tishyā. In case you do this, you will be able to accomplish your duty.

This record has been written here for the following purpose, viz., *that the judicial officers of the city may strive to do their duty at all times and that the people within their charges suffer neither from unnecessary imprisonment nor from unnecessary harassment.*

Hence I shall cause my Mahāmātras, who will be neither harsh nor fierce in temperament but will be gentle in action, to set out on tours of inspection, every five years, for the following purpose, viz., to ascertain if the judicial officers have realised this object of mine and are acting according to my instructions.

Similarly, from Ujjayinī also, the Prince Viceroy will send officers of the same class every year for the same purpose and will not allow three years to pass without such a mission being sent out on tour. In the same way, officers will be deputed from Takshaśilā also. When these Mahāmātras will set out on tours of inspection every year, then without neglecting their normal duties, they will have to ascertain the following, viz., if the local judicial officers are acting according to the king's instructions. (Emphasis mine).

Both edicts ring an unmistakable tone of pacification: in RE XV, through persuasion and propaganda that Aśoka is resolutely intent on the welfare of the people, and in RE XVI, through impartiality in judicial administration. The people who are to be so pacified or won over are explicitly called *Antānam avijitānam*" (as paraphrased by Sircar, "the 'people of the unconquered territories lying beyond the borders of my dominions").

The location of the two inscriptions in the maritime regions of eastern Kālinga presents a further problem as to where these unconquered border areas could be. It is reasonable to assume that Sāmāpa and Tosālī were within Aśoka's dominions as his Mahāmātras could not have operated from them otherwise. In that case it was the littoral of Kālinga that was within his dominions. The frontier region, whose people, the emperor wanted to win over had therefore to be located in western Kālinga (i.e. away from the sea). What it implies is that Aśoka had not annexed the whole of Kālinga to his empire and the area he calls "unconquered (avijita)" frontier was actually the major part of Kālinga. In such a situation, the opening words of RE XIII, namely "The country of the Kālingas was conquered by king Priyadarsi"—which is repeated in modified form twice more in the text—would have been challenged in Kālinga.

Even if one explains thus the omission of RE XIII in the two Kālinga sites, one is faced with a further difficulty in trying to understand why RE XI and XII are also excluded from the series in these sites. RE XI is a straightforward declaration of the principles of moral conduct that Aśoka wanted to propagate in his dominions. But the emphasis is on the gift of Dharma (i.e. propagation of Dharma through precept and example). It runs as follows:

Thus saith king Priyadarsi, Beloved of the Gods.