

ASHOKA'S EDICTS: A SOURCE OF ANCIENT INDIAN GOVERNANCE

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Abstract:

Ashoka's Edicts, inscribed during the reign of Emperor Ashoka (c. 268–232 BCE), serve as a profound source of insight into ancient Indian governance and reflect a transformative approach to leadership. After the traumatic Kalinga War, Ashoka adopted Buddhism, which deeply influenced his political philosophy and governance model. The edicts articulate his commitment to the principles of Dhamma, emphasizing non-violence, compassion, and ethical conduct. The inscriptions were strategically placed across the Mauryan Empire, ensuring accessibility to diverse populations and conveying Ashoka's vision of a just and moral society. They promote values such as religious tolerance, social welfare, and respect for all living beings, illustrating Ashoka's innovative approach to statecraft. Unlike traditional rulers, Ashoka viewed his role as a moral guide rather than merely a military leader, fostering a sense of responsibility towards his subjects.

In addition to legal and moral guidelines, Ashoka's edicts advocated for transparency and accountability within the administration. He appointed Dhamma Mahamatras—officials tasked with promoting ethical governance and ensuring adherence to Dhamma—demonstrating a commitment to a system that prioritized the welfare of the populace. His policies included the establishment of hospitals, veterinary care, and infrastructure aimed at improving living conditions. Ashoka's emphasis on education and cultural development further illustrates his holistic view of governance, which integrated moral and ethical principles into everyday life. His legacy continues to resonate in contemporary discussions on ethical leadership and governance. Overall, Ashoka's Edicts stand as a testament to the potential of governance rooted in compassion and moral responsibility, offering enduring lessons on the importance of ethical leadership in fostering social harmony and justice.

Keywords: Ashoka, Edicts, Ancient, Indian Governance.

INTRODUCTION:

Emperor Ashoka, a prominent ruler of ancient India, reigned during the Maurya Dynasty from approximately 268 to 232 BCE. He was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan Empire, and the son of Bindusara. Ashoka initially followed in his family's footsteps, expanding the empire through military conquests, notably the brutal Kalinga War around 261 BCE. The war's extensive human suffering and loss deeply affected him, leading to a profound transformation in his beliefs. After witnessing the devastation of the Kalinga conflict, Ashoka embraced Buddhism and renounced violence. This pivotal change marked the beginning of his commitment to the principles of Dhamma, emphasizing non-violence, compassion, and social welfare. Ashoka sought to govern not just through military power but through moral authority and

ethical governance. He communicated his ideals through a series of edicts inscribed on rocks and pillars across his empire, promoting values such as religious tolerance, respect for all life, and the welfare of his subjects.

Ashoka established hospitals, wells, and rest houses, reflecting his dedication to public welfare. He also advocated for the protection of animals and the environment, highlighting his belief in the sanctity of all living beings. His promotion of Buddhism extended beyond his empire as he sent missionaries to spread the faith to neighboring regions, contributing to the religion's growth. Ashoka's reign is often regarded as a golden age of Indian history, characterized by a flourishing of art, culture, and trade. His edicts and policies laid the foundation for a governance model based on ethical principles and social responsibility. Following his death, Ashoka's influence persisted, shaping the course of Indian history and inspiring future generations. His legacy remains relevant today, embodying the ideals of compassionate leadership and moral governance.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

This study explores the Ancient Indian Governance during reign of Ashoka,

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study is based on secondary sources of data such as articles, books, journals, research papers, websites and other sources.

ASHOKA'S EDICTS: A SOURCE OF ANCIENT INDIAN GOVERNANCE

The reign of Emperor Ashoka, one of the most significant rulers of ancient India, marked a unique epoch in Indian history. As the third ruler of the Maurya Dynasty, Ashoka expanded his empire to cover nearly the entire Indian subcontinent. His rule not only established an extensive empire but also set forth principles that guided governance through ethical administration. Ashoka's transformation after the brutal Kalinga War led him to renounce violence and embrace Buddhism, subsequently shaping his governance philosophy. His edicts, inscribed on rocks, pillars, and caves across his empire, provide valuable insights into the policies, moral principles, and administrative mechanisms of his rule. Ashoka's edicts, composed in languages including Prakrit, Greek, and Aramaic, represent a significant historical source, shedding light on his ideals of governance, religious tolerance, and social welfare, and offering a comprehensive picture of ancient Indian statecraft.

The Kalinga War, fought around 261 BCE, profoundly impacted Ashoka's worldview. This war was devastating, with thousands of soldiers and civilians killed. The scale of destruction and suffering led Ashoka to a profound introspection, which in turn triggered his conversion to Buddhism. Following his adoption of Buddhist principles, Ashoka began promoting non-violence, compassion, and social harmony as state policies. His commitment to the doctrine of 'Dhamma' or 'Dharma' became the bedrock of his governance. Unlike the modern concept of religion, Ashoka's Dhamma was more of an ethical and moral code that transcended sectarian boundaries. His edicts serve as a tangible testament to his efforts to instill these values across his vast

empire. This moral framework was not merely personal but was institutionalized within the administrative fabric of the Mauryan state, serving as a guide for governance. Through his edicts, Ashoka communicated his principles of tolerance, welfare, and righteousness to his subjects, ensuring that the state machinery operated on these moral foundations.

The edicts of Ashoka were strategically placed at public locations, such as along major trade routes and near population centers, to ensure that they were accessible to a wide audience. They were inscribed in local languages and dialects to cater to the diverse linguistic groups within his empire. The choice of such locations highlights Ashoka's intent to reach out directly to his people, thereby bypassing intermediaries who might misinterpret or dilute his message. These inscriptions offer a unique glimpse into Ashoka's innovative methods of governance and his desire to connect with his subjects. Through these inscriptions, Ashoka addressed various societal issues, from interpersonal relationships and moral conduct to respect for elders and care for animals. The edicts reveal Ashoka's commitment to a paternalistic model of governance, where the ruler's duty extended beyond enforcing law and order to nurturing the ethical and moral welfare of his people. This approach was revolutionary, as it emphasized the ruler's role as a moral guide, shaping not only the administrative but also the cultural and social landscape of his empire.

Ashoka's emphasis on Dhamma was a response to the ethical and moral dilemmas he perceived in society. The edicts outline his vision of a society where people coexist peacefully, practice tolerance, and uphold compassion. Unlike the concept of state religion, Ashoka's Dhamma was an inclusive moral code that embraced values from multiple religious and philosophical traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and local beliefs. By adopting such a universal ethical code, Ashoka ensured that his policies resonated with the diverse religious and ethnic groups within his empire. He urged his subjects to respect all religious sects, demonstrating a level of religious tolerance that was rare for his time. This policy of religious tolerance was particularly significant in a multi-religious and multi-cultural empire like Ashoka's, where sectarian conflicts could have destabilized the state. His advocacy for harmony among different communities and his call for mutual respect illustrate his forward-thinking approach to governance, where the ruler's focus extended beyond administrative efficiency to the promotion of social cohesion.

Ashoka's administrative policies were also guided by his commitment to welfare and compassion. In several edicts, he emphasized his responsibility to provide for the physical and spiritual well-being of his subjects. He established a network of welfare facilities, including hospitals, veterinary clinics, rest houses, and wells, reflecting his holistic approach to governance. This welfare system extended beyond human subjects to include animals, as Ashoka believed in the sanctity of all life forms. His policies for animal welfare, such as restrictions on animal slaughter and provisions for veterinary care, showcase his belief in non-violence and compassion. This emphasis on social welfare represents a significant departure from earlier governance models, which primarily focused on military conquests and economic expansion. By prioritizing the welfare of his people and animals, Ashoka set a precedent for a benevolent style of governance that sought to address the material and spiritual needs of his subjects.

The concept of non-violence (Ahimsa) occupied a central place in Ashoka's governance philosophy. After experiencing the horrors of the Kalinga War, he renounced aggressive expansion and adopted a policy of conquest by Dhamma. This policy marked a shift from military conquest to the peaceful spread of ethical principles. Rather than using force to expand his empire, Ashoka sought to influence neighboring regions through diplomacy and moral persuasion. His edicts reveal his desire to promote peaceful coexistence and non-violence not only within his empire but also in his relations with foreign kingdoms. This policy of non-aggression contributed to a period of relative stability and prosperity during Ashoka's reign, as resources that would have been spent on warfare were redirected towards social welfare projects. Ashoka's commitment to non-violence extended to various aspects of governance, including the judicial system, where he promoted leniency and rehabilitation over harsh punishments. His approach to law and justice reflected his belief in the potential for moral transformation, as he encouraged his officials to practice compassion and moderation in their dealings with the public.

Ashoka's governance model also emphasized transparency and accountability. He instituted a system of officers known as 'Dhamma Mahamatras' or 'Moral Officers' who were responsible for monitoring the moral conduct of people and spreading the principles of Dhamma. These officials were tasked with ensuring that Ashoka's ethical policies were implemented at all levels of society. The Dhamma Mahamatras acted as intermediaries between the ruler and the people, providing a channel for the public to express their grievances and needs. This system of moral oversight illustrates Ashoka's commitment to ethical governance, where officials were not only administrators but also custodians of moral values. By appointing such officers, Ashoka institutionalized his vision of a morally upright society, ensuring that the principles of Dhamma were integrated into the daily lives of his subjects. This approach to governance, where officials were accountable for both administrative efficiency and moral integrity, highlights Ashoka's innovative efforts to create a just and compassionate state.

The edicts also reflect Ashoka's emphasis on social harmony and the promotion of ethical conduct within society. He urged his subjects to respect their elders, show kindness to their relatives, and practice moderation in their personal lives. By promoting these values, Ashoka sought to instill a sense of moral responsibility among his people, encouraging them to live in harmony with each other and with the natural world. His edicts contain frequent references to virtues such as truthfulness, self-control, and gratitude, which he believed were essential for the well-being of society. Ashoka's focus on ethical conduct extended to his officials, whom he expected to lead by example. By emphasizing moral values in governance, Ashoka aimed to create a society that was not only prosperous but also just and compassionate. His approach to governance reflects a paternalistic model, where the ruler's responsibility extended beyond mere administration to the moral and ethical development of his subjects.

One of the notable features of Ashoka's governance was his policy of religious tolerance, which he promoted actively through his edicts. He encouraged people of different faiths to coexist peacefully, emphasizing that each religion should be respected and that no one should disparage the beliefs of others. His edicts express his

belief that all religions share a common ethical foundation and that true spirituality lies in respecting the diversity of beliefs. Ashoka's policy of religious tolerance was not merely a matter of state policy but was rooted in his personal conviction that all religions contribute to the moral upliftment of society. This policy of religious pluralism was a pragmatic approach to governance in a diverse empire, where religious tensions could have led to conflict. By advocating respect for all religions, Ashoka aimed to foster a sense of unity and mutual respect among his subjects. His approach to religious tolerance represents a significant achievement in ancient Indian governance, as it laid the foundation for a culture of coexistence and respect for diversity.

Ashoka's edicts reveal his commitment to social welfare, which he saw as an essential duty of the ruler. He undertook various measures to improve the living conditions of his subjects, including the construction of hospitals, roads, wells, and rest houses. His welfare policies extended to both urban and rural areas, as he believed that the state's duty was to provide for all its citizens, regardless of their social or economic status. His policies aimed at reducing social disparities and promoting the well-being of all sections of society. Ashoka's emphasis on welfare reflects his understanding of governance as a means of serving the people, rather than as a tool for self-aggrandizement. His approach to welfare was rooted in his belief in the sanctity of all life forms, as evidenced by his policies on animal protection and environmental conservation. By prioritizing social welfare, Ashoka demonstrated a visionary approach to governance, where the ruler's duty was to ensure the holistic development of society.

The edicts also reflect Ashoka's concern for justice and his efforts to promote fairness in the legal system. He emphasized the need for leniency and compassion in the administration of justice, encouraging his officials to consider the circumstances of each case and the importance of understanding the human condition when meting out justice. Ashoka's legal philosophy was based on the belief that every individual, regardless of their actions, deserves dignity and consideration. He urged his officials to focus not solely on punishment but on rehabilitation, encouraging a judicial process that could promote moral growth and reintegration into society. This approach marked a radical shift from the often punitive nature of justice seen in other contemporary empires, emphasizing a restorative rather than retributive model of justice.

The edicts frequently reference the importance of ethical conduct among officials and the need for integrity in the judicial process. Ashoka believed that judges and officials should embody the principles of Dhamma, setting an example for the populace. By instilling values of fairness and impartiality, he aimed to create a legal system that not only enforced laws but also reflected the moral fabric of society. This ethical underpinning of the judicial system was revolutionary in ancient governance, setting a precedent for future administrations. Ashoka's insistence on the moral character of officials was a way to ensure that the legal system was not merely a tool of oppression but a means to promote social order and justice.

The emphasis on ethical governance was coupled with the idea that the ruler should be approachable and accessible to his subjects. Ashoka encouraged a system where citizens could voice their grievances and seek redress from their rulers. This concept of direct interaction between the ruler and the ruled was innovative for its time. By promoting channels of communication and feedback, Ashoka fostered a sense of participation and

responsibility among his subjects. His edicts urged people to engage with their local officials and express their concerns, thereby creating a more responsive and accountable government. This participatory approach to governance helped to establish a sense of trust between the emperor and his subjects, reinforcing the legitimacy of his rule.

In addition to promoting justice and ethical governance, Ashoka's edicts underscored the importance of education and knowledge dissemination. He believed that an informed citizenry was crucial for the health of the state. As part of his commitment to education, he encouraged the establishment of schools and centers for learning. These institutions aimed to cultivate moral values and intellectual growth among the youth. By prioritizing education, Ashoka recognized that knowledge was essential for fostering critical thinking and ethical behavior in society. This focus on education also reflected his broader vision of a well-informed populace that could engage constructively with the governance process.

Moreover, Ashoka's edicts emphasized the interconnectedness of all living beings, which formed the basis for his policies on environmental stewardship and animal welfare. He recognized the vital role that nature played in sustaining life and the importance of respecting the natural world. His policies included the planting of trees, the establishment of sanctuaries for animals, and the prohibition of hunting and cruelty towards animals. Ashoka's vision of ecological responsibility illustrated his understanding of governance as a holistic endeavor that encompassed not just human welfare but the well-being of the planet as a whole. This integrative approach remains relevant today as contemporary societies grapple with environmental challenges.

The cultural legacy of Ashoka's edicts also extended to the promotion of the arts and cultural exchange. By fostering an environment where creativity and innovation could flourish, he encouraged the development of literature, architecture, and artistic expression. Ashoka's support for the arts is evident in the construction of stupas, monasteries, and pillars that not only served as symbols of his reign but also as cultural landmarks reflecting the richness of Indian civilization. These monuments, adorned with intricate carvings and inscriptions, became important sites of pilgrimage and cultural exchange, enhancing the cultural tapestry of the empire.

The spread of Buddhism during Ashoka's reign also played a crucial role in shaping the moral and ethical dimensions of governance. His commitment to the Buddhist principles of compassion, non-violence, and enlightenment influenced not only his policies but also the wider cultural milieu of the time. Ashoka's efforts to promote Buddhism as a state-supported religion facilitated the establishment of a network of monasteries and educational institutions, which became centers for philosophical inquiry and ethical training. This integration of religion and governance set a precedent for future rulers, illustrating the potential of religious principles to inform and guide political leadership.

As a ruler who espoused the values of Dhamma, Ashoka also recognized the importance of diplomacy and international relations. His edicts convey a clear message of peace and coexistence, advocating for respectful relationships with neighboring states. He dispatched envoys and missionaries to foreign lands, seeking to

promote the principles of Dhamma and establish diplomatic ties based on mutual respect. This diplomatic strategy not only enhanced Ashoka's reputation as a benevolent ruler but also contributed to a period of relative peace and stability within the region. By prioritizing diplomacy over warfare, he demonstrated a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of nations and the need for cooperative relationships.

The enduring legacy of Ashoka's edicts extends beyond his reign, influencing the course of Indian history and governance for centuries to come. The principles articulated in these edicts continue to resonate in contemporary discussions on ethical leadership and governance. Ashoka's emphasis on moral responsibility, social welfare, and religious tolerance remains relevant today, inspiring leaders and reformers seeking to create just and compassionate societies. His vision of governance as a means to promote the well-being of all, regardless of their status, serves as a timeless reminder of the potential for rulers to effect positive change in the world.

In the modern context, Ashoka's edicts offer valuable lessons on the importance of ethical leadership and the role of governance in fostering social harmony. They underscore the necessity of a compassionate and inclusive approach to governance that prioritizes the welfare of all citizens. The principles of Dhamma, which advocate for peace, tolerance, and social responsibility, continue to provide a moral compass for contemporary societies navigating the complexities of governance in an increasingly interconnected world.

CONCLUSION:

Ashoka's Edicts represent a landmark in the history of governance, embodying principles that transcend time and cultural boundaries. By prioritizing Dhamma—rooted in non-violence, compassion, and social welfare—Ashoka transformed the role of the ruler from a mere enforcer of laws to a moral guide and caretaker of his people. His innovative approach emphasized transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct, paving the way for a governance model that focused on the holistic well-being of society. The edicts not only addressed the immediate needs of the populace but also fostered a culture of respect for diverse beliefs, highlighting Ashoka's commitment to religious tolerance and social harmony. This legacy of compassionate leadership continues to inspire modern governance discussions, illustrating the importance of ethical principles in creating just societies. Ashoka's vision endures as a powerful reminder of the potential for rulers to effect positive change through moral responsibility and social consciousness. His edicts serve not only as historical artifacts but also as timeless lessons in the pursuit of a fair and equitable society, making Ashoka a significant figure in both ancient and contemporary discourse on governance.

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