

K. Jayaram**Voices in Stone: Emperor Ashoka's Stone Edicts (1)**

When voices are put on a solid medium like rock to convey what is very dear to the heart of the messenger, we naturally tend to inquire how timeless and true these are. The writer had obviously intended his voice to be remembered for generations to come.

The emperor is reflective; we can almost hear him saying in many more words than the inscription form found in widely dispersed places in most parts of the Indian subcontinent. He ruled a vast area; most parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan were part of his empire.

The edicts were not meant just to ensure his rule during his lifetime, but for all time — when he knew they would be heard, understood and become important guidelines. They were meant to be arbiter for a better world and for putting the chaotic world into some degree of order and civility. His aim was for an empire built not on the conquest of arms through violent means but the conquest of heart peacefully.

Ashoka welcomed diversity

He was aware that people around the world had different religious belief. Yet for all people, what was common, besides or even in spite of their religion was voiced in his edicts. He wanted to communicate the blueprint for better living: "People of other kingdoms with different sets of belief also lead an honourable way of life, the siblings have brotherly feelings towards each other, they respect their parents and venerable persons. They have good relations with friends, companions and servants. If any one of them suffers, the others share his grief. To cause severance of such deep rooted attachment and commendable feelings by forced separation and slaughter due to acts of war is regrettable. Now I don't want even a fraction of such suffering as the Kalinga war to befall on any one in the future" (Rock Edict XIII).

Life span of religions

Religions come and go the limitations of religions, especially their aging, would have been obvious to Ashoka. The god-forms who lorded as the supreme beings are no longer venerated once newer forms or even formless gods come to be believed. He was careful not to emphasize his religion in his edicts though it is known from Buddhist literature that he not only embraced Buddhism but also was responsible for spreading it far and wide. What he affirms in his edicts is mostly acceptable to variety of religious beliefs that the world has come to see.

Ashoka calls his edicts 'Religious' in a broader sense

The voice of Ashoka is for a common minimum program for the good of all living beings. His voice sounds religious as he calls himself 'The beloved of the gods' but he does not claim to be a special messenger of any god or pose as the incarnation of any god, which is a rather common practice. In fact we have god-men who claim to be incarnation of one god or the other even in 21st century India. Most of these god-men say more or less the same thing as Ashoka did two millenniums ago. But Ashoka found no need for such claim of being incarnation of any god. More importantly, there is no mention of any rituals or prayers to be offered. All that he expects his voice to do is secular in nature with emphasis on better human behavior.

Ashoka's religion

Peace, nonviolence, universal brotherhood, care of all living beings, antiwar, conquest of heart are what he is vocal about and that is what most religions preach, maybe in different ways. The problem with religions is that widely different interpretations are possible, which cause trouble. Ashoka's edicts are the arbiters in such cases. For he talks as spokesperson for all religions. To mediate between religions of his time and all time to come. He says people forget, hence his voice on stone: "Even if a man does us an injury, if bearable and within limits should be borne". It does not sound like total submission, but

sufficiently restrained behavior, enough to maintain harmony in society (Rock Edict XIII).

The forest dwellers who were then known for their barbarity were promised clemency if they renounced violence, as Ashoka desired for all beings "freedom from injury, self restraint, impartiality and joy of life". Even regarding wars to be waged, he said "Avoid it, if you are forced to enter, then use minimum force and cause minimal suffering" (Rock Edict XIII).

God liked king

Ashoka calls himself 'Beloved-of-the-Gods'. His interpretation of god is more likely to be just being 'good'. To make his voice more acceptable, he uses the word 'god' but there is no mention of any specific god. Therefore it is acceptable for any believer in god. His god can be as much a Hindu god as can be Islamic or Christian. His guidelines for a better living will not be against any religion, in spirit. Though each religion may word it differently.

Secular Laws

Ashoka wanted to spread secular laws to govern our day to day living as religious laws. For the rationalists, his edicts are dear as it is secular in nature and is indeed the spirit behind any constitution-law of a civilized nation.

In each of his edicts, few of his favourite aspects are emphasized. In one he sets an example for an emperor who is ever eager to hear about the distress of his people, he affirms he can be disturbed even when he is in the women's quarters, in his bedroom, in his litter, in the garden, or even on the toilet, "to work for the welfare of the whole world" (Rock Edict VI). The concern in his voice is role model for administrators, be they emperors, dictators or president elects.

The Suffering in his edicts

The sufferings of Emperor Ashoka, who won a bloody war of conquest over the Kalingas, in the ancient state of Orissa, come loud and clear even today from

his rock edicts. "One hundred thousand were slaughtered; one hundred and fifty thousand were carried away as slaves and a million were wounded and mutilated" (Rock Edict XIII). Blood is known to have flown like a river in the battle field. For many days the nearby river Daya — which incidentally means mercy — is known to have turned red, awash with the blood of the slain. The battle took place in BC 261 at Dhouli in East Central India.

The scene after victory was gory, with mutilated, disembowelled bodies. The cry of the family members who lost their dear ones was heart wrenching. The cry of the ladies who came searching for their braves who did not return from the battlefield, the inconsolable wives who embraced the dead bodies of their husbands was heartrending. The sorrow of mothers who came searching for their sons and realized that he is no more was terrible. The children who found their father dead, stood shocked at the murder and mayhem in the battlefield. The inhuman behaviour of the victorious over the life and limbs of the vanquished moved Ashoka deeply. Ashoka declared that he would not fight another war, which has such terrible consequences.

Ashoka regretted his violent conquest and swore to do only conquest of hearts by spreading what he calls as 'sacred laws', which are mostly secular in nature. In his Girnar edict, he declares "Men have faith not merely in a single creed" and acknowledges the need to appreciate and accept the differently believing and holders of heterodox views. "There is nowhere a country where the people have faith in one creed alone".

Ashoka's concern for nature, animals and vegetarianism

His concern about animal welfare is such that he not only bans animal sacrifice, he was even ready to change his food habits to end slaughter of animals in his own kitchen (Rock Edict I).

Ashoka was one of the first emperors to promote vegetarianism, essentially to prevent cruelty to animals. He also had lots of care for animals and made elaborate arrangements for treating sick animals. Hospitals were built along with suitable medicinal herb gardens for their benefit.

“Animals with young ones’ on milk or younger than six months should not be slaughtered [...] Living creatures should not be fed with living creatures [...] Forests should not be burnt [...]” (Pillar Edict V).

Ashoka’s Edicts as touchstones for beliefs

In a complex approach to human spirituality usually called religion, many misinterpretations take place. From time immemorial, the world has suffered from extreme interpretations and theories. A common minimum acceptable degree of behaviour towards followers of other ‘ism’ is always needed. A basic level to qualify as civilized nation was set by Ashoka through which people were reminded of the good aspects of all religious beliefs: “Don’t be under the impression that your belief alone is superior. Know and respect other’s religion too. Only then will your religion become all the better for it” (Rock Edict XIII).

The voice to govern the good way of life is many times lost in the voluminous body of many a religion. In his edicts there is no mention of what will happen to the ‘sinners’, apart from the administrative controls and the threat of punishment. He is silent about anybody else being born to redeem the sinners; whether absolute submission to god and constant prayers will guarantee heaven; whether past life will guide this life. The voice of Ashoka is direct and to the point. Devoid of religion, yet it is the religion for a better way of living. This is the reason it can coexist with native or global religion. Ashoka’s edicts are like a balance with standard weights to measure the degree of misinterpretation of our own belief.

Nameless emperor and nameless God

Ashoka very rarely used his proper name in his edicts. In most of them, the writer calls himself ‘God’s favourite person’ and king chosen to convey humane views for a better world. Until the edict at Maski was found with his name, it was not known with certainty that those were his edicts.

The Emperor, it appears purposely did not give his god a specific name or mention his voice as being revelation of any specific god. Had he said that, then it would have been dated and rather restrictive, to be appreciated and followed by a particular creed.

Cyclical

Liberal and reactionary beliefs and regimes change from one to another with alarming regularity. This was very well recognized by Ashoka who affirmed constant reminders like his edicts alone can prevent civilizations turning barbaric (Pillar Edict VIII).

Ashoka's inscriptions were carved on many a handy rock prominently seen in places of human habitation or along trade routes. His pillar edicts are works of such high art that they stand out as tribute to the matter they contain. Civilizations have a tendency to get reborn in a particular place even after getting completely routed and burnt down. In archaeological excavations, many layers of habitations are routinely found. Ashoka seems to have identified such prominent and most likely places of habitation and hence two thousand years later too, his inscriptions resurface and get deciphered. Each age can have its own reading as we do now.

His emblems of fearless lions and the wheel of law have been adopted as the symbol of nationhood and peaceful coexistence by the Indian government. There are very few symbols that convey the same meaning even after thousands of years, as does Ashoka's. The imagery is as vocal as his written words, which need to be heard again and again to prevent the world slipping back into cycle of violence after brief period of peace.

NOTES:

1. Ashoka was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Mauryan dynasty, and one of the greatest of the Indian emperors (ca. 274-232 B.C.). The earliest accounts of his reign are found in legends

recorded by Buddhist chroniclers in Sri Lanka and India. He inscribed on stone a record of moral law (*Dharma-lipi*) with the hope that it would endure to inspire and guide his descendants and the people.

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