

Emperor *Ashoka*, the Chief Patron of Buddhism: A Review

Md. Ashikuzzaman Khan Kiron
Assistant Professor

Department of Pali and Buddhist Studies, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

kiran@du.ac.bd/kiran@bhu.ac.in

Date of Call for Article:

27 May, 2024

Article Received Date:

25 July, 2024

Date of sending for peer review:

27 August, 2024

Date of receiving from peer review:

22.09.2024

Date of Revision:

02 October, 2024

Date of Acceptance:

14 November, 2024

Date of Publication:

26 January, 2025

Abstract: The role of Emperor *Ashoka* is the main reason behind the position Buddhism has reached in the present world. He is one of the patrons of Buddhism. It was under his auspices that the third Buddhist council was held that Buddhism was able to establish itself in the position it has in the world today.

Objective: The purpose of this study is to present a holistic assessment of how Emperor *Ashoka* was able to reach the present position by patronizing Buddhism. The article is presented in total three phases. Namely:

1. To present a brief introduction to Emperor *Ashoka*;
2. To assess and present the context of Emperor *Ashoka's* closeness with Buddhism;
3. To evaluate Emperor *Ashoka's* contribution to Buddhism

Methodology: This research employs a library-based analytical approach with a through review and critical analysis of associated historical texts and scholarly articles. The study explores the life and contributions of Emperor *Ashoka*, focusing on his patronage of Buddhism and its healthy impact on the global society.

Result: Biography of Emperor *Ashoka*, his closeness and expansion of Buddhism has been explored in the article. Emperor *Ashoka* has been found to be able to reach the present position by patronizing Buddhism through the study.

Conclusion: The *Tripitaka* was perfected by the third Buddhist council. He played an important role in propagating Buddhism in nine countries at that time, so this religion stands on a strong foundation in the world today. His son *Mahendra* and daughter *Sanghamitra* were among the Buddhist monks and nuns sent by Emperor *Ashoka* to the nine countries. Due to that continuity, the spread of Buddhism has been hindered in the world till today. The next successors are carrying on its continuity. As a result, a strong foundation of Buddhism is created.

Keywords: Asoka, Third Buddhist Council, *Dīpavaṃsa*, *Mahāvāṃsa*, Chandagupta Maurya.

Paper Type: Research Paper

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Introduction

Gautama Buddha was a preacher of Buddhism. He tried to impart the knowledge he acquired to the people. But after his *Mahāparinirvāṇa* three Buddhist councils were held respectively. Emperor *Ashoka* patronized the third Buddhist council. Emperor *Ashoka* achieved fame by patronizing Buddhism in the same way that he gained worldwide fame politically. All the great people who have done good deeds over time have become immortal in history like Emperor *Ashoka*. Because his important contribution to the welfare of Buddhism or to the preservation of Buddhism surpasses his other works. He changed from griefless to '*dharmashoka*'. As a result, he is immortal in history. Besides, his other karma also made him immortal. This is evaluated in the continuity of era or time or history. Hence the research paper is completed in three steps; which is mentioned in abstract.

Ashoka

Nothing much is known about *Ashoka's* early life. His father's name was *Bindusara*. It is said that *Bindusara* had sixteen wives and 101 sons. *Bindusara's* eldest son was named *Sushima*. *Ashoka* was the second and *Tishya* was the youngest son. *Ashoka's* mother was named '*Dharma*' according to South Indian legend and '*Subhadra*' according to North Indian legend. Names of five wives of Emperor *Ashoka* are found. Namely: *Mahadevi*, *Asandhimitra*, *Karubaki*, *Padmavati* and *Tishyarakshita*. The exact number of *Ashoka's* sons is not known. However, the names of some of his sons are known. Namely: *Mahendra*, *Tibur*, *Kunal* and *Jalauk*.

Ascension to the Throne

After the death of his father *Bindusara*, his son *Ashoka* inherited the Magadha Empire in 273 BC. But *Ashoka's* coronation took place four years later. After the death of *Bindusara*, 'there was a very bloody conflict and in this conflict *Ashoka*, with the help of a minister named *Radhagupta*, killed 98 brothers and ascended the throne (Weiger 98). That is why *Ashoka* is called '*Chandashoka*'. Later he got attracted to Buddhism and became known as '*Dharmashoka*' for his great public welfare activities (Weiger 98). The events of the first few years of *Ashoka's* reign are not documented. After ascending the throne, he continued to live and rule the kingdom like his predecessors. Prince *Yuvraj (Ashoka)* naturally loved fun, games, war. During the first thirteen years of his reign, he adopted a policy of imperial expansion and maintaining friendly relations with foreign countries. '*Ashoka's* kingdom ranged generally from the Syrian border in the west to the Brahmaputra valley in the east and from *Kāshmir* in the north to the *Pennar* River in the south (Majumdar 71).

Historical Evidence

Considerable historical material is available about the reign of Emperor *Ashoka*. Following are the evidences detailing his reign. Namely: 1. *Ashoka's* script; 2. Buddhist scriptures *Dīvyavabdana*, *Dīpavamsa* and *Mahāvamsa* Among these elements the inscription is the most important. They were propagated by Emperor *Ashoka*. Inscriptions were modern state documents. The inscriptions were essentially permanent and immutable.

Title of *Ashoka*

In ancient India, the kings of each state tended to take the title of regional king. A king assumed a title when he came to power. His true status was determined by that title. But even though it was in ancient India, it has remained in the present day society in a different way. The measure or measurement of power is still practiced by rank or title. But those who use these titles try to convey their own power or measure of respect; they may not even know its history. But it is there - sometimes in hidden form or in open form. However, Emperor *Ashoka* also took the same title and presented history on a larger scale. Because if

people at the highest level of the society, country or state did karma, it is easily focused. Basically, '*Ashoka* became king and assumed the titles '*Devanam Piya*' and '*Devanam Piya Piyadasi* (Oldernburg 25)

Kalinga War

Kalinga War was the most important political event during Emperor *Ashoka's* reign. *Kalinga* kingdom was formed in ancient times with parts of present day *Orissa* and *Ganjam* districts. During the reign of the Nanda kings, *Kalinga* became part of Magadha. *Kalinga* probably became independent after the fall of the Nanda dynasty. During the time of *Chandragupta Maurya*, *Kalinga* was a powerful kingdom and under this kingdom there were 60,000 infantry, 1000 cavalry and 700 war elephants. 'A new era in the history of Magadha and India began with the *Kalinga* war. In fact, the phase of *Digvijay* ends and the phase of religion begins (Chawdhuri 288)

State Policy

Ashoka inherited a vast empire. The conquest of *Kalinga* further expanded his empire. *Ashoka* took effective measures for the good governance of this vast empire. *Mauryan* rule during the time of his grandfather *Chandragupta Maurya* was highly centralized. *Ashoka* changed this situation and implemented patriarchal state ideals. He used to compare the subjects of the state to his own children. This philanthropic interpretation of royal duties was a key principle of *Ashoka's* regime. According to this ideal of royal duty, *Ashoka* made various reforms in the administrative field.

Ashoka's Attraction and Adoption of Buddhism

According to legend, after hearing '*Appamada Vagga*' recited by his niece *Nigrodha Sramana*, *Ashoka* was very pleased and attracted to Buddhism and became a devoted devotee of Buddhism (Malalassekhera (217-19). *Ashoka* accepted Buddhism in the eighth year of his reign (Chattapadhyaya 219). He was originally attracted to Buddhism and accepted Buddhism after receiving initiation from the Buddhist monk Upagupta. *Ashoka's* conversion can also be seen in his personal life. Emperor *Ashoka's* devotion to Buddhism initiated him to practice of pilgrimage. Basically, Emperor *Ashoka's* pilgrimage and such benevolent actions are truly commendable. Devotion to elders, kindness to relatives and servants, kindness to all living beings, *Brahminism*, charity to the poor, purity in life, truthfulness and charity etc. were the main focus of *Ashoka's* thought. That the Dhamma can benefit human life is clearly understood from *Ashoka's* thoughts. Every religion has echoed that tone.

Ashoka's Dharma Victory Policy

Sometimes, a king has to adopt some liberal policies in order to run the kingdom successfully. As a result peace prevails in the state. However, in many cases it may interfere with interests in some matters. So it is seen by many that, 'The interests of the *Mauryan* Empire were undermined by *Ashoka's* religious conquest policy (Thapar 34). Sometimes, certain policies undermine the driving force of the state. It may be adopted for noble reasons, but it creates exactly this kind of situation. This, sometimes, brings good long term results. It can be felt after getting that result. In fact, this empire was weakened militarily as a result of his policy of religion and internal governance. *Kalhan's* '*Rājataranginī*', *Abul Fazl's* '*Ain-e Akbari*' record the contribution of Emperor *Ashoka* in spreading Jainism in *Kāshmir*. Human freedom is a very important issue. If it is religious freedom then it becomes even more important. Because if they can follow their own religion, there is peace in the state. However, in case of exception, it is necessary to take that action. Emperor *Ashoka* was able to adopt the system. It is known that, 'in his empire all the people of all castes lived in peace and he had no fear of personal affairs. It is very clear that Emperor *Ashoka* was able to show his religious magnanimity. If he had failed to show that doing so, then people wouldn't have enjoyed their religious freedom in his kingdom. Basically, it depends largely on the will of the king or government of the state.

Patronage of Third Buddhist Council

The third Buddhist council is the most important in the history of Buddhism. After the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, he played a leading role in establishing and propagating Buddhism by patronizing the third council. Through this council the Buddhist holy book the *Tripitaka* is completed. The council was held mainly 236 years after Buddha's *Mahāparinirvāṇa* and *Moggaliputta Tishya Thera's* presidency of the council. *Moggaliputta Tishya Thero* wrote a book called '*Kathavatthu*'. To which the third part of *Tripitaka* '*Abhidharma Piṭaka*' is attached. That's why *Tripitaka* is evolved from '*Dvipitaka*'. 'Originally the council took place in the 17th year of Emperor *Ashoka's* reign (Smith 85). According to '*Sāmāntapāsādikā*', '*Kathāvatthupparakaraṇa*' and '*Sinhalese History*' the third Buddhist council was invoked by Emperor *Ashoka* to prevent Buddhism from being corrupted by infiltrators of different creeds. According to Sinhalese history 'at the end of the third Buddhist council he sent Dharma Ambassador to nine places. The purpose was to propagate Buddhism, as mentioned above. They are: '*Mahendra-Sinhalese, Majjhāntikā- Kāsmīra* and *Gāndhāra, Mahādeva-Mahismandala, Raksita-Vanvāsā, Dharmaraksitā-Aparantaka, Mahā-Dharma-Raksita-Mahārāstra, Mahāraksita-Greek, Majjhima-Himālaya, Sona* and *Uttara-Burma* and Thailand. It is said that, 'His preaching was not only limited to different parts of India, his preaching work also went on in the continents of far Asia, Africa, Europe etc. His son *Mahendra* and daughter *Samghamitra* were engaged in the propagation of Buddhism (Bondhapadhyā 56). Basically, Emperor *Ashoka* set a great example by sending sons and daughters to spread Buddhism. As a result, Buddhism became popular very quickly.

Service to Buddhism

Ashoka's service to Buddhism was the most noteworthy event. As pillars and *stupas* hold the traditions of Buddhism, Emperor *Ashoka* built a number of *stupas* and monasteries to preserve the memory of Buddhism and set up pillars on which he inscribed his understanding of the religious doctrine. He took strong measures to preserve the order of Buddhism and suppress dissension within the *Samgha*. He realized that the study of scriptures is very important. For this and for the followers prescribed a course of study of the scriptures. As a result, it is possible for them to acquire correct knowledge through the study of real scriptures. It is natural that the knowledge of this assumption will enable them to move forward in the days ahead. Followers of any religion play a leading role in sustaining that religion. If followers do not practice and maintain that particular religion, there remains the possibility of misinformation being attached to it. So followers have to play an important role in this regard. Emperor *Ashoka* took this issue very seriously.

Conclusion

In the context of the above discussion it can be said that, karma makes people great or inferior in the pages of history. Emperor *Ashoka* is one of the kings who reigned in the Indian subcontinent and is remembered in history. The political history and the kingdom extended far. He was able to make a solid place in the political history of the Indian subcontinent in particular. Just as the history of the Indian subcontinent cannot be written without Emperor *Ashoka*, so it is not possible to write the history of Buddhism without him. Because he was the only king who was able to put Buddhism on a firm footing by patronizing the third Buddhist council by preserving the *Tripitaka* and sending Religion Ambassadors to different countries. So Emperor *Ashoka* is one of the few kings who will be remembered forever in the political history of Buddhism. With whose strong cooperation we see Buddhism in such a successful position in the modern world. Therefore, under the patronage of Emperor *Ashoka*, Buddhism became a world religion.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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