



Aśoka Role in the Spread of Buddhism beyond India

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Abstract

Emperor Aśoka, who ruled the Mauryan Empire from approximately 268 to 232 BCE, is celebrated for his pivotal role in the propagation of Buddhism beyond the Indian subcontinent. Following his conversion to Buddhism after the Kalinga War, Aśoka embraced the principles of dharma encompassing moral law, compassion, and non-violence and endeavored to integrate these values into the governance of his vast empire. His initiatives significantly influenced the spread of Buddhism across Asia.

Central to Aśoka efforts were his edicts, inscribed on rocks and pillars throughout his empire, which articulated his commitment to dharma and the welfare of his subjects. These inscriptions not only served as moral directives but also as instruments for disseminating Buddhist teachings. Aśoka patronage extended to the construction of stupas and monasteries, the establishment of medical and educational facilities, and the organization of missionary activities.

One of Aśoka most notable contributions to the spread of Buddhism was his dispatch of missionaries to various regions. He sent his son, Mahinda, to Sri Lanka, where Buddhism was embraced as the state religion. Additionally, Aśoka emissaries reached areas as distant as Greece and Egypt, fostering cross-cultural exchanges and dialogues. These missions were instrumental in establishing Buddhist communities and institutions in new territories.

The impact of Aśoka initiatives is evident in the enduring presence of Buddhism in regions such as Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean. His efforts laid the foundation for Buddhism's transformation from a localized tradition into a global religion. This paper examines Aśoka strategies and their long-term effects on the dissemination of Buddhism, drawing upon primary sources, including his edicts and contemporary accounts, to provide a comprehensive analysis of his legacy in the spread of Buddhism.

Keywords - Aśoka the Great, Spread of Buddhism, Edicts of Aśoka, Buddhist Missionaries, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Emperor Aśoka, the third ruler of the Maurya Dynasty, reigned over the Indian subcontinent from approximately 268 to 232 BCE. His rule marked a significant period in Indian history, characterized by political consolidation, administrative efficiency, and cultural flourishing. However, Aśoka is most renowned not for his military conquests or governance alone, but for his profound transformation following the Kalinga War conflict that resulted in massive loss of life and human suffering. The experience of this war prompted a moral and spiritual awakening in Aśoka, leading him to embrace Buddhism and adopt the principles of dharma, or righteous conduct, as the guiding

framework for his personal life and imperial policies.

Aśoka significance in Indian history lies in his unique combination of political power and moral vision. Unlike many rulers whose achievements are measured solely by territorial expansion, Aśoka legacy is defined by his dedication to ethical governance, social welfare, and the propagation of Buddhist teachings. He is credited with promoting non-violence, religious tolerance, and public welfare initiatives, which included the construction of roads, hospitals, and educational institutions. Aśoka reign also represents a pivotal moment in the historical relationship between political authority and religion, demonstrating how a ruler's personal convictions can shape societal values and international cultural exchange.



The central thesis of this paper is that Aśoka conversion to Buddhism and the policies he implemented as a result were instrumental in spreading Buddhism beyond the borders of India. Through a combination of edicts, missionary activities, and patronage of Buddhist institutions, Aśoka actively disseminated the teachings of the Buddha to regions such as Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and Central Asia. His efforts not only established Buddhist communities in these regions but also laid the foundation for the religion's growth as a global spiritual tradition. By examining Aśoka strategies and their impact, this paper highlights the historical significance of his role in the international spread of Buddhism, showing how his vision and initiatives contributed to the enduring presence of Buddhism across Asia and beyond.

Aśoka Conversion to Buddhism and Its Historical Context

Emperor Aśoka, one of the most prominent rulers of the Maurya dynasty, reigned over much of the Indian subcontinent from approximately 268 to 232 BCE. Initially remembered for his military campaigns and territorial expansion, Aśoka's reign took a dramatic turn following the conquest of Kalinga around 261 BCE. Kalinga, a prosperous kingdom on the eastern coast of India, resisted annexation into the Mauryan Empire. The resulting war was intense and devastating, causing massive casualties and widespread suffering. According to Aśoka's own edicts, over 100,000 people were killed, and countless others faced famine, displacement, and despair. The scale of this destruction profoundly affected Aśoka, triggering a moral and spiritual awakening. He realized the futility of conquest through violence and the human cost of war, prompting him to seek a path grounded in compassion, non-violence, and ethical governance.

Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism must also be understood within the religious context of his time. Scholars such as Joseph M. Kitagawa note that rulers of kingdoms and republics in

northeast India often patronized heterodox sects such as Jains and Ājīvakaśto limit the influence of Brahmanical authorities in state affairs. Aśoka's ancestors had associations with these groups. His father, Bindusāra, supported Brahmanism, while his mother, Dharma, was devoted to the Ājīvakas. Buddhist sources note that in the early years of his reign, Aśoka followed non-Buddhist teachers, including Ājīvakas, Jains, and Paṇḍranga Parivrājakas, and even dedicated caves to the Ājīvakas. Despite these connections, it was Aśoka alone among the Mauryas who embraced Buddhism and gave it state patronage, making him the first Maurya emperor to actively promote Buddhist institutions.

Following this transformation, Aśoka adopted Buddhist principles not only personally but also politically. His edicts, inscribed on rocks and pillars throughout the empire, testify to his commitment to dharma, ethical conduct, and compassion. The Minor Rock Edicts describe him as a lay follower of the Buddha who, after a period of observation, developed a close association with the Saṅgha and actively promoted the teachings of Buddhism. He recommended key texts for both monks and lay followers, established measures to prevent schisms within the Saṅgha, and emphasized moral guidance, religious tolerance, and welfare for all beings.

Aśoka's ethical vision translated into concrete policies. He built hospitals for humans and animals, planted shade trees along roads, constructed rest houses for travelers, and encouraged moral education. Major Rock Edict XIII explicitly records his remorse for the bloodshed in Kalinga and outlines his goal of governance guided by dharma rather than force. Beyond India, he dispatched missions including his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitratī to Sri Lanka, supported the construction of stupas and monasteries, and facilitated the spread of Buddhist teachings along trade routes to Central and Southeast Asia.

Aśoka conversion to Buddhism marked a turning point in Indian history. The Kalinga War catalyzed a profound ethical and spiritual transformation, reshaping both his personal life and the governance of the Mauryan Empire. By integrating Buddhist values into statecraft, Aśoka are defined kingship as a moral and social responsibility. His reign not only strengthened Buddhist institutions within India but also laid the foundation for the religion's growth across Asia, demonstrating the enduring impact of personal conviction, ethical leadership, and religious patronage on world history.

The Edicts of Aśoka

Aśoka edicts stand as some of the earliest, most powerful examples of a ruler using written proclamations not just for administration, but to shape the moral and spiritual tone of his society. He inscribed these messages on rocks, pillars, and even inside caves throughout his empire, creating a direct line of communication with his subjects.

Content and Purpose

The edicts are broadly categorized into Major Rock Edicts (14 in total), Minor Rock Edicts, and Pillar Edicts. They encompass a range of themes: ethical conduct, social welfare, administrative guidance, religious tolerance, and non-violence. For example, Major Rock Edict III encourages compassion, truthfulness, and humane treatment of servants and animals. Pillar Edicts expand on those values Pillar Edict II defines dhamma as a combination of compassion, truthfulness, and purity, while Pillar Edict V lists animals that should not be killed and notes the release of prisoners

Highlight : Promotion of Buddhism and Moral Governance

Two inscriptions stand out :

- Major Rock Edict XIII: Perhaps the most profound of all. Aśoka expresses remorse for the bloodshed of the Kalinga War and commits wholeheartedly to non-violence and moral governance by dharma instead of force

- Rock Edicts XI and XII: These emphasize moral values like respect for parents, generosity, and inter-religious respect. In particular, Edict XII urges people to honor others' religious traditions rather than disparage them.

While the edicts often promote universal moral values rather than explicitly mentioning Buddha, they are deeply rooted in Buddhist ethical principles especially ahimsa (non-violence), tolerance, and compassion

Geographical Distribution

Aśoka edicts appear across a remarkably vast territory from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, to all corners of the Indian subcontinent some key locations include:

- Kandahar (Afghanistan), Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra (Pakistan) sites with rock edicts in local scripts like Kharosthi.
- Kalsi (Uttarakhand), Girnar (Gujarat), Sopara (Maharashtra), Dhauli and Jaugada (Odisha), Erragudi (Andhra Pradesh), Sannati (Karnataka) locations spanning north, west, central, south, and east India where rock edicts have been inscribed.
- Pillars: Erected in strategic urban and pilgrimage centers like Topra-Delhi, Allahabad (Kaushambi), Lauriya-Arera, Lauriya-Nandangarh (Bihar), Sarnath, Vaishali, and Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh).

Aśoka wisely placed edicts along trade routes, pilgrimage pathways, and centers of population so that his ideals could reach a wide audience no matter their faith or region. Aśoka edicts were more than administrative orders they were moral manifestos. Through them, he communicated the values of dharma, compassion, and religious harmony. Two edicts Rock Edict XIII and Pillar Edicts XI–XII stand out for their explicit commitment to ethical governance and interfaith respect. By strategically embedding these messages across his empire from Afghanistan to southern India Aśoka created a moral conversation that transcended language and locality.



Missionary Activities and Diplomatic Engagements

Aśoka adoption of Buddhism did not remain a private or domestic matter; it became a cornerstone of his foreign policy and imperial outreach. Recognizing the universal appeal of the Buddha's teachings, Aśoka used both missionary activity and diplomacy to extend the influence of Buddhism beyond India's borders. This dual strategy religious missions backed by diplomatic exchanges played a decisive role in transforming Buddhism from a regional Indian faith into a trans-Asian tradition.

Missionary Dispatches

The Edicts of Aśoka, particularly the Major Rock Edict XIII, provide direct testimony of these efforts. In this inscription, Aśoka declares that his message of dhamma had spread not only across his empire but also to the lands of the Cholas, Pandyas, and Tamraparni (Sri Lanka) in the south, and even to the Greek kingdoms ruled by Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy II of Egypt, Antigonus II of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander of Epirus (Thapar 1997; Dhammika, The Edicts of King Asoka). This is among the earliest records of an Indian ruler establishing moral and religious connections with Mediterranean powers.

The most celebrated mission was to Sri Lanka. Aśoka son, Mahinda (Mahendra), a Buddhist monk, traveled to the island during the reign of King Devanampiya Tissa (mid-3rd century BCE). According to the Mahavamsa, a Sri Lankan chronicle, Mahinda converted the king and much of the population, leading to Buddhism's establishment as the state religion. Aśoka daughter, Sanghamitta, later brought a sapling of the sacred Bodhi tree from Bodhi Gaya to Anuradhapura, where it was planted and continues to be revered. These missions permanently rooted Buddhism in Sri Lanka, where it has flourished uninterrupted for over two millennia.

Aśoka also directed missions toward Southeast Asia. References in Buddhist

traditions suggest that missionaries reached Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, and Cambodia, carrying not just texts but also ritual practices and architectural models like the stupa. Archaeological remains of early Buddhist sites in these regions show Indian influence, suggesting that these missions successfully planted the seeds of Buddhism, later developed through trade and local patronage.

In Central Asia, Aśoka influence was felt through missions dispatched northward. The routes taken were closely linked with trade corridors that later became part of the Silk Road. Buddhist communities established in present-day Afghanistan, Bactria, and Gandhara became crucial intermediaries, adapting Buddhist teachings to Hellenistic cultural contexts and transmitting them further west and east.

Diplomatic Relations

Aśoka strategy was not limited to sending monks; he also used diplomacy. His inscriptions mention alliances and correspondence with Hellenistic rulers, which provided safe passage and legitimacy for Buddhist emissaries in foreign lands. By framing Buddhism not as a sectarian faith but as a universal code of ethics compassion, tolerance, and non-violence Aśoka ensured its acceptance in culturally diverse settings. This diplomatic approach enabled Buddhist missions to integrate into local traditions without conflict.

Effectiveness and Legacy

The effectiveness of these missions is evident in the enduring presence of Buddhism across Asia. In Sri Lanka, Aśoka missions directly established Theravāda Buddhism, which later spread to Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos. In Central Asia, Buddhist monasteries flourished for centuries, influencing Chinese pilgrims like Faxian and Xuanzang. Even in the Hellenistic world, although Buddhism did not take permanent root, there is evidence of cultural exchange, including Greco-Buddhist art in Gandhara.

Patronage of Buddhist Institutions



Aśoka embrace of Buddhism was not limited to personal conviction or public proclamations. His reign is also remembered for extensive material support to Buddhist institutions, which provided the organizational backbone for the preservation and dissemination of the Buddha's teachings. Through his patronage of stupa, monasteries, and councils, Aśoka ensured that Buddhism had the physical and institutional foundations to grow both within India and beyond.

Stupas and Monasteries

One of Aśoka most visible contributions was the construction and restoration of stupas mound-like structures enshrining relics of the Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, Aśoka built 84,000 stupas across his empire, though this number is likely symbolic, representing his zeal rather than a literal count. Archaeological evidence confirms his role in enlarging and embellishing existing stupas at sites such as Sanchi, Bharhut, Amaravati, and Taxila. The Great Stupa at Sanchi, which still stands today, is one of the finest examples of Mauryan architecture and a lasting symbol of his devotion.

Aśoka also supported the establishment of monasteries (viharas), which became centers of learning, meditation, and missionary training. These institutions not only housed monks but also acted as cultural and educational hubs where Buddhist doctrines were taught to both monastics and lay followers. By integrating monasteries into the empire's infrastructure, Aśoka made Buddhism accessible to a wider population and created a network of centers that could train missionaries for dispatch abroad.

Compilation of Scriptures and Monastic Codes

Aśoka patronage extended into the intellectual and doctrinal life of Buddhism. Sources like the Mahavamsa suggest that he played an indirect role in the Third Buddhist Council, convened at Pataliputra under the leadership of Moggaliputta Tissa. The council was aimed at purifying the

Sangha (monastic community) by expelling opportunists who had joined for material gain, and at reaffirming the authentic teachings of the Buddha.

It was during this council that portions of the Tipiṭaka (Pāli Canon) are said to have been recited, categorized, and preserved in a systematic manner. The council also reinforced the Vinaya (monastic code of discipline), ensuring uniform practice among monks. These developments were crucial for maintaining doctrinal consistency as Buddhism spread into diverse cultural contexts. Without such standardization, the religion might have fragmented more rapidly.

Impact on Preservation and Dissemination

Aśoka institutional patronage had long-lasting effects. By funding stupas, he created sacred sites that became pilgrimage centers, reinforcing collective memory and devotion among Buddhists. These monuments also served as visual representations of the faith, helping communities identify with Buddhism even without deep textual knowledge.

Monasteries, meanwhile, functioned as both centers of learning and bases for missionary activity. They enabled the training of monks like Mahinda and Sanghamitta, who carried Buddhism to Sri Lanka and beyond. The standardized scriptures and monastic codes developed under Aśoka reign ensured that as Buddhism moved across Asia, it retained a recognizable core of beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

The reign of Emperor Aśoka marks one of the most transformative chapters in Indian and world history. His life illustrates how the personal moral awakening of a ruler can alter the course of a civilization and reshape the destiny of a religion. Beginning with the horrors of the Kalinga War, Aśoka decision to turn away from violence and embrace Buddhism became the foundation for a new model of kingship one rooted not in conquest by arms, but in conquest by dharma.



Throughout this paper, we have traced the different dimensions of Aśoka's role in the spread of Buddhism. His conversion set the stage for a radical shift in governance, where compassion, tolerance, and welfare took precedence over aggression and expansion. His edicts, carved across the subcontinent, were more than political directives; they were moral guideposts, spreading the ideals of non-violence, ethical conduct, and religious harmony to diverse populations. His missionary activities, most famously through Mahinda and Sanghamitta in Sri Lanka, ensured that Buddhism transcended the boundaries of India and became firmly established in other lands, influencing Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and beyond. His patronage of institutions, from stupas to monasteries, provided Buddhism with sacred spaces, organizational stability, and standardized scriptures, allowing the faith to endure and flourish long after his reign.

Taken together, these initiatives underscore the thesis of this study: Aśoka's conversion to Buddhism and the policies that followed were instrumental in transforming Buddhism from a regional Indian tradition into a world religion. While trade, local rulers, and cultural exchanges all played important roles in Buddhism's expansion, it was Aśoka's vision, infrastructure, and moral diplomacy that gave the religion both momentum and legitimacy on a global scale.

The historical significance of Aśoka's role lies not only in his contribution to Buddhism but also in the example he set for leadership itself. He demonstrated that power could be exercised in the service of peace and ethical values, offering a model of governance that resonates even today. The enduring presence of Buddhism across Asia, from Sri Lanka and Myanmar to China and Japan, owes much to the foundations laid during his reign.

In the final measure, Aśoka's legacy is twofold: as a ruler who humanized imperial power through moral conviction, and as a patron who ensured that the Buddha's

message of compassion and wisdom reached far beyond its place of origin. His story remains a testament to the enduring influence of ethical leadership in shaping not only nations but also the spiritual journeys of humanity.

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