

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

by

ANANDA W P GURUGE

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"¹. 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*"²

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,³ 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.¹ *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).¹

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).¹

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.² 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:³. (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 records¹ and (iii) over two hundred lithic records which the Emperor had caused to be inscribed on rock faces, pillars and caves² 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,³ 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 history⁴ is that inscriptions *per se* are no more reliable than other sources of historical information. On the contrary, they could even be more misleading.

-
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 Rājatarangāni. 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."¹ 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.²

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 residence³—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. *Mahāvamsa* 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,¹ 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:

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,¹ 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.'¹

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,² 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 Ājivakas 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 (*Sāsanadāyādīn*), 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.³

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.¹ 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.

-
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.¹ 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 Dharmamahāmātra (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,¹ 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*"² (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."³ (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.⁴ 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

-
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)¹ 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' (Shahbazgarihi 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'² (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.

-
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 Dhauli 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 mé and to induce them to practise the duties associated with Dharma.*

Therefore, all of you should listen to this record read out on every Chāturmāsi 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.

There is no such gift as the gift of Dharma, no such act of dividing as the separation of Dharma from what is not Dharma, and no such kinship as kinship through Dharma. These comprise the following, viz., proper courtesy to slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, liberality to friends, acquaintances and relatives as well as to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas, and abstention from the slaughter of living beings.

In respect of this, whether one is a person's father, or son, or brother, or master, or friends, or acquaintance, one ought to say to him: "This is meritorious. This ought to be done." If he acts in this manner, happiness in this world is attained by him and endless merit is produced for him in the next world by the said *gift of Dharma*." (Emphasis mine).

RE XII is Aśoka's *Magna Carta* on religious tolerance. It has remained unmatched as a most enlightened statement on interreligious amity. The full text is as follows:

King Priyadarśi, Beloved of the Gods, honours men of all religious communities with gifts and with honours of various kinds, irrespective of whether they are ascetics or householders. But the Beloved of the Gods does not value either the offering of gifts or the honouring of people so highly as the following, viz, that *there should be a growth of the essentials of Dharma among men of all sects*.

And the growth of the essentials of Dharma is possible in many ways. *But its root is restraint in regard to speech, which means that there should be no extolment of one's own sect or disparagement of other sects on inappropriate occasions and that it should be moderate in every case even on appropriate occasions. On the contrary, other sect should be duly honoured in every way on all occasions.*

If a person acts in this way, he not only promotes his own sect but also benefits other sects. *But, if a person acts otherwise, he not only injures his own sect and disparages other sects with a view to glorifying his sect owing merely to his attachment to it, but he injures his own sect very severely by acting in that way. Therefore, restraint in regard to speech is commendable, because people should learn and respect the fundamentals of one another's Dharma.*

This indeed is the desire of the Beloved of the Gods that *persons of all sects become well-informed about the doctrines of different religions and acquire pure knowledge*. And those who are attached to their respective sects should be informed as follows: "The Beloved of the Gods

does not value either the offering of gifts or the honouring of people so highly as the following, viz., that there should be a growth of the essentials of Dharma among men of all sects”.

Indeed many of my officers are engaged for the realization of the said end, such as the Mahāmātras in charge of the affairs relating to Dharma, the Mahāmātras who are superintendents of matters relating to the ladies of the royal household, the officers in charge of my cattle and pasture lands, and other classes of officials. *And the result of their activities, as expected by me, is the promotion of each one's sect and the glorification of Dharma.* (Emphasis mine).

Assuming that the scribes did not make a mistake, what could reasonably explain their deletion?

An in-depth analysis of the two sets of edicts (namely, RE XI—XIII absent in the Kālinga series and RE XV and XVI which replace them there) raises the question whether the propagation of Dharma was not a secondary priority in Kālinga where the real priority was the pacification of the unconquered frontier people through propaganda on the emperor's virtues, on the one hand, and the impartial administration of justice, on the other. It may also be conjectured that there were no Dharma-Mahāmātras at Samāpā and Tosali¹ who could be entrusted with the implementation of RE XI to XIII. Again, the doubt is raised that Kālinga was really not annexed to his dominions and administered as an integral part of the empire. Thus the lithic evidence from Kālinga only deepens the mystery of the famous war which, in Aśoka's own words, was the turning point not only in his life but in his attitude to war and empire building.

VI. AŚOKA'S ROLE IN THE PROPAGATION OF BUDDHISM IN HIS EMPIRE

The same type of discrepancy which exists between Aśoka's own inscriptions and the Buddhist tradition relating to his conversion to Buddhism persists as regards his role in the propagation of Buddhism. According to Buddhist literary sources, Aśoka had been the ideal Buddhist ruler extending his generous and devout patronage to Buddhism in every possible way. Specifically mentioned is his initiative in both internal and foreign missionary endeavours after the Third Buddhist Council.

1. MRE II, which is a continuation of MRE I and hence datable twelve years after Aśoka's coronation, enjoins the Rajjukas and Rāshtrikas to spread his 'Dharma. That was before the specialized cadre of Dharma-mahāmātras was instituted. Duties and functions of these officers are outlined in RE V and PE VII. As RE XV and RE XVI are certainly after the institution of Dharma-mahāmātras, their absence in Kālinga is significant. Only ordinary mahāmātras appear to be mentioned in RE XV and XVI.

As already stated earlier, the accuracy of specially the Sri Lankan Pali sources as regards information on these missions has been established beyond doubt on account of archaeological corroboration.¹ But the nagging question which every Aśokan scholar had to deal with had been why the inscriptions of Aśoka are themselves less specific.

One of the more recent Aśokan scholars,² Romila Thapar, makes the following observation:

“More recent analyses suggest, however, that although he was personally a Buddhist, as his edicts addressed to the Buddhist *Sangha* (Order) attest, the majority of the edicts in which he attempted to define *dhamma* do not suggest that he was merely preaching Buddhism... In his edicts Aśoka defines the main principles of *dhamma* as non-violence, tolerance of all sects and opinions, obedience to parents, respect to Brahmins and other religious teachers and priests, liberality toward friends, humane treatment of servants and generosity towards all. It suggests a general ethic of behaviour to which no religious or social group could object. It could also act as a focus of loyalty to weld together the diverse strands that made up the empire. Interestingly, the Greek versions of these edicts translate *dhamma* as *eusebeia* (piety) and no mention is made anywhere of the teachings of the Buddha, that would be expected if Aśoka had been propagating Buddhism.”³

Thapar has made two statements which need clarification: (i) that Aśoka was personally a Buddhist is attested to in his *edicts addressed to the Sangha* and (ii) no mention is made *anywhere* of the teachings of the Buddha. As shown earlier, Aśoka did express his affiliation to Buddhism in several lithic records and not all of them are addressed to the Sangha. Certainly, MRE, I which is found in thirteen locations is not an edict addressed only to the Sangha. So is RE VII which refers to his pilgrimage to the sacred Bodhi tree. If there is an impression created in some minds as a result of statements like Thapar's that Aśoka did not broadcast his Buddhist affiliations far and wide, his lithic records would not permit such an impression to be sustained.

-
1. See also Rhys Davids: *Buddhist India*, pp. 299-304. Equally important as inscriptions on the relic-caskets of Moggaliputta Tissa and some of the missionary monks are the bas reliefs of the Eastern Gateway at Sanchi. These have been identified as depicting Asoka's initiative in sending a sapling of the sacred Bodhi Tree to Sri Lanka. The decorative motifs of peacocks (*moriya*) and lions (*simha*) are interpreted to symbolize Mauryan-Sinhala relations which this Gateway represents.
 2. Author of "Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas" Delhi, 1961 and of a contribution on Aśoka in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th edition) Vol. IX.
 3. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (15th edition) Vol. IX p. 352.

The other statement that the teachings of the Buddha are not mentioned *anywhere* stands refuted by MRE III at Bāirat (Bhabru) where seven identifiable discourses of the Buddha have been prescribed by Aśoka to his co-religionists - the religious and the lay - as his recommended anthology of readings from the Buddhist Canon. Equally significant are word-perfect direct quotations from the Tripiṭaka which are found in the edicts. Beni Madhab Barua has marshalled together enough evidence which supports his conclusion that "none was, perhaps, more steeped in the knowledge of the *Buddhavacana* than Aśoka, that none drank deeper at that fountain of inspiration"¹ What Thapar had in mind, quite probably, was that Aśoka makes no reference to the fundamental Buddhist doctrines such as the four Noble Truths, the three signata (anicca-dukkha-anatta), the twelve point Dependant Causation (Paticcasamuppāda), or even Nirvāṇa.

The anthology of Buddhist texts which he identified serves as an index to what aspect of Buddhism had attracted his attention. Twice in MRE III he calls these *sutias* "the texts of Dharma" and "the true Dharma." It is true that the teachings of the Buddha, when shorn of the characteristic fundamental doctrines, would be in many ways similar to the contemporary systems of eastern India such as Jainism. Thus Aśoka's Dharma could resemble any of these systems and, perhaps, Aśoka had this eclectic element as one of the guiding principles in the choice of values to be inculcated.

But the religious system from which Aśoka's Dharma is furthest removed is Brahmanism or Hinduism founded on the authority of the Vedas. None of the phases of pantheism, kathenotheism or monism in the development of Hindu thought is reflected in the edicts. Nor do any of the known gods of Hinduism figure by name anywhere in the hitherto discovered inscriptions.

On the contrary, what they speak very lightly of are the rites and rituals which are central to Hinduism:

Thus saith king Prityadarśī, Beloved of the Gods.

People perform various auspicious ceremonies on the occasions of illness, the weddings of sons, the weddings of daughters, the births of children and the setting out on journeys. *On these and similar other occasions, people perform many auspicious ceremonies. And on such occasions, the women folk in particular perform many and diverse ceremonies which are trivial and meaningless.* (RE IX). (Emphasis mine).

1. B.M. Barua, *op. cit.* Part II, p. 60.

Specifically prohibited by Aśoka were animal sacrifices (No *kicchi jive ālabhitu pajohitaviye*)—RE I. Yet the Brahmans were held in high regard and his injunction on showing reverence to religious persons always grouped Śramaṇas and Brāhmaṇas together.

One conclusion which emerges from all this internal evidence of Aśoka's own lithic records is that the Dharma he taught was none other than the code of ethics of Buddhism as the Buddha himself preached in such Suttas as Sigalovāda, Dhammika, Vyagghapajja, Parābhava, etc. each of which is as devoid of references to characteristic Buddhist doctrines as Aśoka's inscriptions are. So when, as a minimum message, the Rajukas and Prādeśikas were ordered to convey the following to his subjects, Aśoka was presenting the quintessence of practical Buddhism:

“Meritorious is obedience to mother and father. Meritorious is liberality to friends, acquaintances and relatives and to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas. Meritorious is abstention from the slaughter of living beings. Meritorious is to spend little and store little.” (RE III)

“One should obey one's mother and father and likewise one's elders. One should be steadfast in one's kindness towards living beings. One should speak the truth. In this way, one should propound these attributes of Dharma. In the same way, the pupil should honour his teacher and this practice should be established by one in the proper manner among one's relations. This is an ancient rule and the principle is long standing. One should act in this way.” (MRE II).¹

Thus saith kind Priyadarśī, Beloved of the Gods.

“A person has an eye on his good deed only and says to himself: ‘This good deed have I done.’ Not on the least does he notice his sin (*pāpa*), saying to himself: ‘This sinful act have I perpetrated, ‘or’ This indeed is what is called sin.’ But this is certainly difficult to scrutinize. Nevertheless, one should verily look into the matter thus: ‘These passions surely lead to sin, such as violence, cruelty, anger, vanity and jealousy. Let me not ruin myself by reason of these very passions.’ One should seriously reflect on the following: ‘This one is for my good only in this world and the other one is for my good also in the next world.’ ” (PE III)

These teachings, in fact, are the very ones which are elaborated in the seven Buddhist texts he recommended in the Bairat (Bhabru) Edict. What we see in the edicts is nothing more than a paraphrased and condensed version

1. This basic list of Dharma recurs throughout Aśoka's edicts and inscriptions. Cf. MRE II and RE XI

of the ethical teachings of these texts. Once again, the Sri Lankan Pali sources provide further evidence on the kind of Buddhist teachings. Aśoka must have underscored. The first sermon which each of the teams of Buddhist missionaries preached is recorded as follows:

Majjhantika in Kashmir and Gandhāra:

Āsivisūpama-sutta either Āsivisa-sutta of Samyutta-nikāya which is an allegory on evil forces a person has to be conscious of or Āsivisa-sutta of Anguttara-nikāya on anger).

Rakkhita in Vanavāsa:

Anamatagga Samyutta which concentrates on the evils of ignorance and craving.

Dhammarakkhita, the Greek, in Aparanta:

Aggikhandopama sutta (also preached by Mahinda in Sri Lankā) which emphasizes moral conduct.

Mahādhammarakkhita in Mahārāshtra:

Mahānāradakassapa Jātaka, which upholds goodness, generosity and charity as opposed to hedonistic pleasures.

Mahārakkhita in the Greek country:

Kālakārāma-sutta on the Buddha's comprehension of the world without being subject to it.

Majjhima in Himālaya:

Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta, the first sermon outlining the four Noble Truths and the eightfold path.

Uttara in Suvāṇṇabhūmi:

Brahmajāla-sutta which analyses different philosophical speculations and underscores moral conduct.

Mahinda in Sri Lankā:

Cūlahatthipadopama-sutta which stresses the life of a real devotee.

With the exception of Dhammacakkappavattana sutta, all these sermons could be described as not highlighting characteristic Buddhist teachings just as Aśoka's inscriptions. But none could refute that these suttas do constitute the teachings of the Buddha.

It is also evident that the foundation for the code of moral conduct which Asoka expounded in his edicts and inscriptions is identical with that of popular Buddhism. that is, Buddhism as a popular mass religion founded on the principle of reward or retribution for action not only in this very life but also in the next. Taught through a vast array of interesting narratives presented in Jātaka, Vimānavatthu, Petavatthu, Apadānā, Buddhavaṃsa and Cariyāpitaka in the Tripiṭaka itself, and, elaborated in an extensive literature in all Buddhist countries, this form of popular Buddhism promoted happiness in the next birth - usually in one of the *svargas* or heavens - as the immediate goal of liberality and good conduct. This message has been spread in Buddhist circles not only through verbal communication but more importantly through visual aids in sculpture and painting. RE IV underlines Aśoka's adoption of similar means for the propagation of Dharma; he says:

“Abstention from slaughter of life, absence of cruelty to living creatures, seemly behaviour to relatives, seemly behaviour to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas, obedience to mother and father, and obedience to the aged have increased now owing to the instruction in Dharma imparted by King Priyadarśi, Beloved of the Gods, to such a degree as was not possible to achieve for many hundreds of years in the past *by means of showing to the people the representations of celestial cars and celestial elephants, masses of hell-fire as well as many other heavenly forms.* The practices of *Dharma of the above kind* as also of various other kinds have increased and king Priyadarśi, Beloved of the Gods, will cause such practices of Dharma to increase still more.”
(Emphasis mine).

If Aśoka was responsible for this innovation, as the edict suggests, the fact that the practice of illustrating happiness in heavens and suffering in hells has remained a significant aspect of Buddhist art would imply its original association with the propagation of Buddhism.

Taking all these clues into consideration, it is reasonable to conclude that Asoka's claim that “every proclamation by the beating of drums has become the ‘proclamation of Dharma’” applies to the propagation of popular Buddhism through both administrative mechanisms (which the edicts and inscriptions outline) and missionary operations (of which detailed and accurate records have been preserved by the Sri Lankan Sangha).

VII. FOREIGN MISSIONS OF ASOKA

PI VII, found only on the Topra Pillar now in Delhi and dated in the 27th year from coronation, summarizes Aśoka's efforts for the promotion of the Dharma. In his own words, the following were the steps he had taken:

For a discussion of the main characteristics of popular Buddhism, see my *Buddhism-The Religion and its Culture* (2nd Revised Edition), Colombo 1984, Chapter VIII.

“This thought occurred to me: “I will cause proclamations of Dharma to be proclaimed and instruction in Dharma to be imparted. Hearing these, the people will conform to them, will be elevated and will progress considerably through the promotion of Dharma.”

For this purpose have I caused proclamations on Dharma to be proclaimed, and various kinds of instruction in Dharma have I ordered to be imparted, so that those officers of mine who are placed by me over many people will also preach and disseminate them. And the Rajjukays are placed by the me over many hundred thousands of beings and the have also been ordered: “Instruct the people who are devoted to Dharma in such and such a manner.”

“Having this very matter in view, *I have set up pillars bearing records relating to Dharma, appointed Mahāmātrās to deal with the affairs connected with Dharma and issued proclamations on Dharma.*”

“Those Dharma-Mahamatras of mine are occupied with various kinds of activities which are beneficial both to ascetics and to householders. And they are occupied with all the religious sects. I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the affairs of the Saṅgha. Likewise I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the Brāhmaṇas and Ājivakas. Similarly I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with the Nirgranthas. In the same way I have arranged that some of them will be occupied with various other religious sects. The different Mahāmātrās are occupied especially with the affairs of the different religious sects. My Dharma-Mahāmātrās are occupied not only with the communities referred to above, but also with all the other sects not mentioned specifically.”

“My intention is that the noble deeds of Dharma and the practice of Dharma which consists of *compassion, liberality, truthfulness, purity, gentleness and goodness* will thus be promoted among men.”

“Whatever good deeds I have performed, those the people have imitated and to those they are conforming. Thereby they have progressed and will progress further in respect of obedience to mother and father, obedience to elders, courtesy to the aged and courtesy to the Brāhmaṇas and Śramaṇas, to the poor and the distressed and even to slaves and servants.”

“This progress of Dharma among men has been promoted by me only in two ways, viz., *by imposing restrictions* in accordance with the principles of Dharma and *by exhortation*. But of these two, the restrictions relating to Dharma are of little consequence. *By exhortation*

however, *Dharma has been promoted considerably*. The restrictions relating to Dharma that I have imposed. The progress of Dharma among men has, indeed, been promoted by me considerably by exhortation in regard to the abstention from hurting any living being and abstention from killing any animal." (Emphasis mine).

Conspicuous by absence is any reference in this particular inscription to foreign missions. If Aśoka assigned high priority to the dissemination of Dharma beyond his dominions, why was this fact left out from what appears to be a record of his achievements? But three edicts record Aśoka's relations with territories outside his empire.

RE II, which, in the series RE I-VI, is dated twelve years after coronation, speaks of the social service measures that Aśoka undertook in the bordering territories:

Everywhere in the dominions of King Priyadarśi, the Beloved of the Gods, and *likewise in the bordering territories such as those of the Choḍas and Pāṇḍyas as well as of the Sātiyaputra and the Keralaputra as far south as Tāmraparṇi, and in the territories of the Yavana king Antiyoka and also the Kings who are neighbours of the said Antiyoka*-everywhere king Priyadarśi, Beloved of the Gods, has arranged for two kinds of medical treatment, viz., medical treatment for men and medical treatment for animals. And, wherever there were no medicinal herbs beneficial to men and beneficial to animals, they have been caused to be imported and planted. Wherever there were no roots and fruits, they have been caused to be imported and planted. On the roads, wells have been caused to be dug and trees have been caused to be planted for the enjoyment of animals and men.

RE V, which is not dated but definitely written after the creation of the posts of Dharma-Mahāmātras thirteen years after coronation, speaks of the propagation of Dharma in territories of the western frontiers of Aśoka's empire:

"In the ages gone by, there were no officers called Dharma-Mahāmātras. So I created the posts of Dharma-Mahāmātras thirteen years after my coronation. These officers are occupied with all the religious sects for the establishment of Dharma and for the promotion of Dharma as well as for the welfare and happiness of those who are devoted to Dharma *even among the Yavanas, Kumbojas and Gandhāras, the Rāsh-trika -paitryāṇikas and the other peoples dwelling about the western borders of my dominions.*" (Emphasis mine).

It is in RE XIII that we have the most comprehensive account of Asoka's Dharma-vijaya (conquest through Dharma) of foreign lands:

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, 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 Antiyoka is ruling and where, beyond the kingdom of the said Antiyoka, four other kings named Turumaya, Antikini, Maka and Alikasundara are also ruling, and, towards the south where the Choḍas and Paṇḍyas are living as far as Tāmraparṇi.* Likewise here in the dominions of His Majesty, the Beloved of the Gods - *in the countries of the Yavanas and Kambojas, of the Nābhakas and Nābhapanktis, of the Bhoja-paitryāṇikas and of the Andhras and Paulindas* - every where 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 God and are conforming to Dharma and continue to (Emphasis mine).

RE XIII is also not dated. As the appointment of Dharma-Mahāmātras took place thirteen years after coronation, both RE V and RE XIII are to be dated at least several years after that, because they report substantial progress made by this new service.³⁷

RE XIII is of very great significance from the point of view of chronology. It refers to five Greek kings who were Aśoka's contemporaries. They have been identified and dated with a fair degree of accuracy as follows :

Antiyoka (also mentioned in RE II): Antiochus II Theos of the Seleucid dynasty-Syria and West Asia (i.e. the immediate western neighbour of Aśoka's empire): 261-246 B.C.

Turamaya (Tulamaya): Ptolemy II Philadelphus-Egypt: 285-247 B.C.

Antikini (Antekina): Antigonus Gonatas - Macedonia: 277-239 B.C.

Maka (Maga): Magas - Cyrene in North Africa: 282-258 B.C.

Alikasundara: Alexander of Epirus: 272-245 B.C.³⁸

37. B.M. Barua: Loc. cit. p. 7.

38. The identification of Alikasundara with Alexander of Corinth (652-244 B.C.) is chronologically untenable.

These dates lead us to the conclusion that the foreign Dharma-vijaya of Aśoka should have commenced at least by year 258 B.C., which is the last year of the reign of Magas of Cyrene. What makes this date particularly significant is that it enables the reign of Aśoka to be more reliably dated. Calculating from different starting points such as the date of the Buddha's demise, Alexander's invasion and Candragupta's relations with Seleucus Nicator, the date for Aśoka's coronation has been postulated by Aśokan scholars as 265-264 B.C.; 273-272 B.C.; or 270-269 B.C. How the year 258 B.C. relates to each of these dates is seen from the following chart:

<i>Preferred date for Aśoka's coronation</i>	<i>latest possible date for foreign missions of Aśoka</i>	<i>Year from Aśoka's coronation</i>
265-264 B.C.	258 B.C.	6th or 7th
273-272 B.C.	"	14th or 15th
270-269 B.C.	"	11th or 12th

From Aśoka's own statements in the edicts and inscriptions about his progressive involvement with Buddhism, as discussed earlier, the creation of the new cadre of Dharma-Mahāmātras thirteen years after coronation is, in every likelihood, the starting point of his Dharmavijaya. Thus a mission to Magas could most reasonably be fixed between 13 and 15 years after coronation. This would, of course, favour 273-272 B.C. as the most acceptable of the dates preferred for Aśoka's coronation. But several major issues relating to Aśoka's foreign missions remain to be solved. Specially a number of convincing Synchronizations in Sri Lankan history favours 270-269 B.C.¹

The most fundamental of such issues relates to whether Aśoka ever sent Buddhist missionaries to the Greek territories specified in RE XIII. It was Rhys Davids who, in 1902, expressed his initial doubts in the following terms:

"It is difficult to say how much of this is mere royal rodomantade. It is quite likely that the Greek kings are only thrown in by way of make-weight as it were and that no emissaries had been actually sent there at all. Even had they been sent, there is little reason to believe that Greek self-complacency would have been much disturbed. Asoka's estimate of the results obtained is better evidence of his own vanity than it is of Greek docility. We may imagine the Greek amusement at the absurd idea of a 'barbarian' teaching them their duty: but we can scarcely imagine them discarding their gods and their superstitions at the bidding of an alien king."²

He proceeded to analyze the data in Sri Lankan Chronicles and elaborated his view further as follows:

1. For a discussion on this chronological issue see the Prolegomena, Chapter VIII. to my new translation of the mahāvamsa to be published shortly.
2. Rhys Davids: *Buddhist India*, pp. 298-299.

“The Chronicles thus not only confirm but also supplement Aśoka’s information about the missions. And when we find that *they ascribe the sending out of the missionaries, not to Aśoka, but to the leaders of the Order, and that they make no mention of any such missions to the Greek kingdoms in the distant west*, it is at least probable that the view they taken is more accurate, in these respects than the official proclamation.”¹ (Emphasis mine).

Before determining the comparative accuracy as regards the record presented by Aśoka, on the one hand, and the Sri Lankan Pali sources,² on the other, it is necessary to analyze Aśoka’s statements in greater depth. In RE II of the series RE I-IV only king Antiochus is mentioned by name. But Aśoka claims that the arrangements were made for the provision of medical treatment for human beings and animals extended to the territories of “also the kings who are neighbours of the said Antiyoka.” Re XIII describes the extent of Aśoka’s Dharmavijaya in two dimensions: (i) geographically and (ii) ethnically. *Geographically*, his conquest through Dharma is said to have extended to dominions as far away as *six hundred yojanas*: It is here that the five Greek kings are mentioned by name. This is the area covered by his emissaries for he says further that, even where his envoys had not penetrated, people have heard of his instructions and practices and were conforming to them. *Ethnically*, his conquest through Dharma is shown as encompassing nonindigenous or minority communities within his dominions such as the Yavanas, and the Kambojas, Nābhakas and Nābhapanktis, Bhoja-paitryānikas, Āndhras and Paulindas.

The figure six hundred is, indeed, significant, Taking a yojana to be about 7 miles, this turns out to be the exact distance from Pataliputra to Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene, as the crow flies. All the countries which the edict mentions—including Sri Lanka in the south—fall within a radius of four thousand miles from Aśoka’s capital. This precision in distance, which is verifiable, shows at least that contact with these distant lands was based on actual travel. With the contemporaneity of the five Greek kings among themselves and with Aśoka established by reliable evidence from Greek sources, Aśoka’s claim to have sent envoys to them can hardly be doubted. A more significant proof comes from the fact that the edicts bearing this information were found in places like Kandahar in Afghanistan and Mansehara and Shahbazgarhi in Pakistan in areas abutting Greek territories and inhabited by Greeks. In fact the adaptation of RE XIII which was found far west as Kandahar was in Greek.

1. Ibid. pp. 301-202

2. *Mahavamsa* XII 1-8, *Dipavamsa* VIII 1-3.

Rhys Davids is correct when he says that the Sri Lankan Pali sources ascribe the sending of missions to the initiative of Moggaliputta Tissa, the seventy-two year old president of the Third Buddhist Council. He may also be correct in his observation that these sources do not mention any missions to the "Greek kingdoms in the distant West." The Chronicles do refer to a mission to Greek territories and, quite interestingly, the missionary sent to Aparantaka—Dhammarakkhita by name—is consistently described as a Yona or Greek.¹ The mission to the country of Yona was led by Mahārahkita² and the first sermon he preached was the Kālakārama-sutta.³ Only one mission to a single Greek country is so mentioned and the most likely interpretation is that it was to the adjoining Greek territory of Antiochus II Theos, whose name occurs both in RE II and RE XIII.⁴ Here arises a very important chronological problem. The Sri Lankan Pali sources place the Third Buddhist Council seventeen years after Aśoka's coronation and hence the missions have to be dated at least eighteen years after coronation. If so, the date usually assigned to RE XIII (i.e. 14-15 years after coronation) would not be acceptable. Either this edict must be regarded as at least four or five years later or some other explanation has to be found.

Here again, the Sri Lankan Pali sources provide a clue. They speak of a mission from and to Sri Lanka prior to that of Mahinda. The return of the Sri Lankan mission of lay envoys is described in the Mahāvamsa as follows:-

"The lord of men (i.e. Aśoka) sent envoys also with *the gift of the true doctrine*, saying: "I have taken refuge in the Buddha, his Doctrine and his Order, I have declared myself a lay disciple in the religion of the Sakya son; seek then even thou (i.e. Devanampiya Tissa), O best of men, converting the mind with believing heart, refuge in these best of gems."⁵

The Chronicles also give a list of the gifts which Asoka sent the Sri Lankan king with this message; and this includes "yellow and emblic myrobalans and precious ambrosial healing herbs."⁶ It is quite possible that it is this type of mission that Asoka described in RE II with its special emphasis on the exportation and planting of medicinal plants in the countries mentioned in it. Sri Lanka is one of these countries. It is equally possible that RE XIII refers to similar envoys of Dharma, sent by Asoka, on his own initiative, to spread the code of moral principles as he had conceived. If so, they could have preceded the missionary efforts which Moggaliputta Tissa put into operation after the Third Council. In this context, an analysis of the Sri Lankan Pali

1. Mahāvamsa XII 5 and 34.

2. Mahāvamsa XII, 6

3. Mahāvamsa XII, 39-40.

4. See Wilhelm Geiger: Mahāvamsa, p. 85 footnote.

5. Mahāvamsa XI, 35-45.

6. Mahāvamsa XI 32.

sources by Y. Dhammavisuddhi on Mahinda's mission to Sri Lanka shows that it was prearranged as regards both timing and venue by means of exchange of envoys."¹

Viewed from such a standpoint, there is no question of comparative accuracy as regards the records of the emperor and those of the Sangha. They, in all probability, speak of two different kinds of missions. Asoka has claimed no credit (as far as the hitherto known lithic sources are concerned) for the missions fielded by Moggaliputta Tissa. But the expressions of gratitude, amounting at times to sheer adulation, by the Buddhist literary sources prove that the efforts of the Sangha would have been difficult, if not impossible, without the emperor's patronage and support. It appears reasonable, therefore, to conclude that Asoka's own missions of official envoys (i.e. Dharmamahāmatras) could have gone as far as Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene while the Sangha sent only one mission to the adjoining territory of Antiochus II Theos. It is quite possible that Asoka's exploratory missions further West revealed the kind of Greek self-complacency that Rhys Davids spoke of and hence no missions were sent there eventually.

VIII CONCLUSION

In attempting to answer the four questions we set ourselves at the beginning of this analysis, we have not only found some answers but also uncovered new issues. This is to be expected when we deal with a topic regarding which the diversity of the sources of information is as complex as the socio-cultural background, scholarly training, and underlying motives, biases and prejudices of the interpreters of such information.

As regards the four questions, our conclusions could be summarized as follows:

1. It was undoubtedly Buddhism which Asoka embraced as his personal religion. He did acquire an in-depth grasp of the doctrines, including its Canonical sources, as a result of close association with the Sangha. There is no firm evidence that he ever became a Buddhist monk himself. On his own admission, his interest in Buddhism had grown gradually over a period of two years and only in the third that he became really enthusiastic. There is no discrepancy between the Buddhist tradition which names Nyagrodha or Samudra as the monk responsible for his conversion and Asoka's inscriptions which simply refer to the Sangha rather than to any individual monk. As regards Moggaliputta Tissa, the central figure in the Buddhist activities of Asoka, the inscription "*sapurisasa Mogaliputasa*" on a relic-casket from Tope No. 2 of the Sanchi group establishes his

1. *Kalyani* (Kelaniya University Journal) II 1933, p. 52—60.

historicity as well as his importance in the Saṅgha. As regards Upagupta to whom a comparative role is assigned in Sanskrit sources, no corresponding archaeological evidence has yet been found.

2. Asoka was already a Buddhist by conversion before his military operations to conquer Kálinga. If the futility of war was convincingly brought to As'oka's attention by this war, the most likely reason was that the war itself was inconclusive. He had conquered only the coastal strip of Kálinga leaving the bulk of the territory outside his dominions with angry people who had to be placated and pacified. The image of an emperor eschewing war after victory because of remorse and repentance-which most of the popular writers on As'oka liked to portray with enthusiasm-is unfortunately, not borne out by evidence.

The Buddhist records make no mention of a Kálinga war because As'oka's conversion was anterior to it and its impact on his faith in Buddhism, if any, was only incidental. But for As'oka, the conviction that all the havoc he created was futile had been a turning point in his imperialistic policy. He abandoned the traditional duty of an Indian monarch to engage in Dig-vijaya and substituted in its place his own form of Dharma-vijaya, which he justified by affirming that the conqueror and the conquered were both happy when the conquest was through Dharma.

3. As'oka was a discerning propagandist who drafted his messages to suit their recipients. What appears *prima facie* to be inconsistencies begin to make sense when his own explanation in RE XIV is taken into consideration. Significantly, the variations in text according to the provenance of a particular edict or inscription reveal that each message was receiver-oriented. The same message in Greek and Aramaic was more tersely and explicitly worded than when his own Indian subjects were addressed.

In areas around the principal Buddhist centres, where Buddhism had taken firm root and hence was better known, he would talk of the Buddha and the Saṅgha and refer to texts from the Buddhist canon. Here he would even call himself by the name, As'oka,¹ which apparently was more popular as the emperor's appellation in Buddhist circles. Elsewhere, he spoke of only the Dharma as he conceived it and referred to himself formally as Priyadars'i, the Beloved of the Gods.

1. Only in the versions of MRB I found at Maski and Gujatta is Asoka referred to by that name.

His silence on the Kālinga war in his lithic records in Kālinga calls for an explanation because the only obvious one is not entirely consistent with Aśoka's character. As regards inconsistencies between the series of Rock Edicts and the series of Pillar Edicts, the reason lies in the objectives for which each was drafted. The sixteen Rock Edicts (including the two in Kālinga) has been prepared to provide exhortation to the people and instructions to officers. The seven Pillar Inscriptions - drafted 26 and 27 years after coronation (that is, at least 10-12 years after the series of Rock Edicts) - turn out to be more autobiographical or historical.

There are, no doubt, very significant omissions as we had highlighted in this paper. But there exists the possibility that new inscriptions could come to light any time in the future. It is only prudent to keep an open mind, considering how most of the conclusions of Rhys Davids, Vincent A. Smith and Mc Phail had to be altered in the light of new discoveries.

4. Asoka did play a major role in the propagation of Buddhism both within and outside his empire. He used the state machinery of Rajjukas and Mahāmātras - adding a new specialized cadre of Dharmamahāmātras - to disseminate a universal code of simple everyday ethics culled out by himself from his favourite Buddhist texts (texts which he recommended to his co-religionists, both clergy and laity).. He replaced the call of drums for military services with that for Dharma. The propagation of his code of ethics was viewed by him as a conquest through Dharma. He commenced the teaching of the Dharma ten years after coronation, according to his Greek/Aramaic inscription. He began inscribing his messages on rocks twelve years after coronation. He issued Pillar Edicts twenty-six and twenty-seven years after coronation.

The dissemination of Buddhism proper with all its doctrinal and practical complexities was an initiative of the Sangha. Asoka's role in this endeavour had been to extend his patronage and support. His major contribution appears to have been in the form of exploratory missions to prepare the receptivity of host countries for missions by monks. As the Sri Lankan Pali sources show, he continued to support the missionary activities in host countries, exposing them in the process to the technical and aesthetic achievement of the Mauryan Civilization.

Out of our analysis also arises a further conclusion as regards the reliability of the various sources on Asoka. The least reliable are the records of the Chinese travellers, Fa Hsian, and Hieun-Tasang because they were based on

what they heard during their travels. The former associates Asoka's conversion anachronistically with a Brahman exponent of Mahāyāna Buddhism by the name of Radhasvāmi. Hieun-Tsang is wrong on at least three major points: he dates Aśoka a hundred years after the Buddha confusing him with Kālāsoka of the Second Buddhist Council fame: Aśoka is introduced as a great-grandson of king Bimbisāra of Magadha and this is geneologically unfounded; and Mahinda is said to be a brother and not a son of Aśoka. Though reliable as regards the central events, the Sanskrit Buddhist sources, *Divyāvadāna* as well as *Asokāvadāna* (Chinese version A-yu-wang-tchuan translated from Sanskrit in 506 A.C. by Sanghabhara) are faulty as regards details. Besides, poetic extravagance has resulted in the masking of facts.¹

What proved to be particularly gratifying is how the Sri Lanka Pali sources acquit themselves with remarkable credit. Once the faith-based accounts of miracles and past lives is removed, the kernel of historical fact which remains is not only substantial and consistent but also provides a key to the interpretation of Aśoka's edicts and inscriptions. The Sri Lankan Pali sources complement Aśoka's lithic records and, where they appear to be contradictory, the basic facts, themselves, need to be reviewed with care. This is what was attempted in this paper as regards the discrepancies between these two sources concerning Aśoka and his connection with Buddhism. The most significant finding of this analysis is that Aśoka's Dharma-Vijaya as described in RE XIII and the Buddhist missions to foreign lands as fielded by Moggaliputta Tissa, of course, with Aśoka's patronage, could be two separate operations different in nature and objectives and also in timing.

1. For an analysis of the validity of Buddhist Sanskrit Sources see my article "Emperor Aśoka's Place in History" in the Journal of the Buddhist and Pali University, Vol. I No. 1.