

Social Aspects of The Teachings of King Asoka

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Abstract : There are two perceptions about the teachings reflected in the inscriptions of King Asoka. One of them is that He propagated ideology of Buddhism and other that He was teaching the 'Laws of Piety' to his subjects. The edicts always spoke about 'Dhamma' and the meaning of the word 'Dhamma' was purely indigenous. 'Dhamma' stands for the meaning of duty. Duty was in a secular sense, duty towards the society not to the religion or cult. It doesn't stand for the meaning bore by English word 'Religion'. If King Asoka was intended to spread Buddhism as a religion He would have mentioned it in his inscriptions. He never meant to propagate any religion or propound a new religion. He has shown faith in 'Sanghas' but 'Sanghas' had secular meaning. Main concern was social degradation. There was some threat to the structure of the pre-existing society. The values and traditions were under threat from some new ideologies or cults. King Asoka never mentioned 'Buddhism' in the sense of a religion or cult. He did mention about Shakyamuni, but Shakyamuni himself never propagated any religion in its real sense. The teachings mentioned in the edicts of King Asoka had objective of reforms and safeguarding values and customs of the pre-existing society which was under threat from new ideologies.

Keywords: Dhamma, Laws of Piety, Religion, Sanghas, Society.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of monograph by V.A. Smith, scholars started to believe the King Asoka was a Buddhist. It is doubtless that King Asoka has firm belief in the teachings of Lord Buddha but it is harsh to state that He was promoting Buddhism as religion. When He speaks of *Dhamma*, it doesn't reflect the meaning of 'religion' and likewise, when he speaks of *Sangha* it doesn't mean Buddhism essentially. King Asoka was for the protection of the moral values and traditions pre-existing in the society. He never patronized Buddhism as a religion. Neither patronizing any religion seems to be in common practice in concerned period. He supported the good practices prevalent in any cult in the contemporary world. King Asoka couldn't be blamed for supporting any religion or cult. He was concerned only for the welfare of the subjects, welfare of all kind. Only Buddhist texts assert that King Asoka had leaning towards their ideology but King Asoka was tolerant towards all ideologies prevalent. It has rightly been emphasized by Wells that King Asoka was a ruler far ahead of his time. King Asoka has identified the adverse effects of some new ideologies trying to capture the important institutions of the concerned period. All of His efforts could be seen by the social point of view, not religious. The present study will try to establish that King Asoka's concern was strictly secular and social in nature.

II. SOCIAL ASPECTS OF THE TEACHINGS OF KING ASOKA

A large number of epigraphs have been recovered on the name of King Asoka. A number of assertions have been made by various scholars of Indian history on the subject of these epigraphs. Some have stated that King Asoka was follower of the Buddhist ideology, as maximum of his teachings resembled the Buddhist ideology. Some don't agree with these assumptions, as they believe that all teachings that reflected in these edicts are of primary level. They reflect fundamental teachings, which could be found in ideologies of any religion of the world. Thus, these teachings could not be authority of single religion or cult, He wished, all ideologies could co-exist and reach everyone. It is doubtful that Asoka had asked his subjects to follow some particular ideology pertaining to any cult or religion. Moreover, King Asoka didn't mention about the third Buddhist Council that took place in *Pataliputra* in the epigraphs, though Buddhist texts did mention Him. The said council is supposed to have taken place 10 years after *Kalinga* war.^[1] King Asoka renounced violence soon after the war of *Kalinga*, though Buddhist texts credited the event to a seven year old *Samanera* named *Nigoha*.^[2] He wishes long life for *Sanghas* but we should not forget that *Sanghas* were the prominent feature of the contemporary political, social, religious or commercial sphere. *Sanghas* would have played necessary role in establishing value based society, as it did for intellectual groups. Due to its importance, *Sanghas* were highly respected in the contemporary times. Even Buddhism, Jainism and other cults organized themselves under *Sanghas*. *Sanghas*, couldn't essentially be taken as a religious term.

Nothing wrong if some scholars named his religion as the religion of 'Piety'. Asoka pays special force on mercy, love for all living creatures, non-violence and respect for elders. It is doubtless that Asoka never felt need to establish new religion or ideology. Organization and establishment of such a vast empire establishes the fact that contemporary society was highly evolved and well developed in nature. Imposing new social laws or traditions was needless for such a developed society with logical and scientific evolution. The king used to be the guardian of the society equally in all societies of the world. India couldn't be exception. States are established due to the political necessity of the societies. Political culture is evolved from the main culture of the parent society. Hence it could be assumed that the religion of the society would have to be the religion of the corresponding state. The declaration of the state's religion would have to be spontaneous. This fact doesn't need any evidence. Some scholars, in order to prove King Asoka a Buddhist Emperor, have searched out supporting evidences from His epigraphs. Weak evidences always construct a weak history. Some historians don't care about the fact. King Asoka seems to have taught a lesson of piety to his dedicated pupils. King Asoka didn't hesitate to entice his subject to follow the path shown by him. He also follows those traditions to precedence.

Scholars insisted that religions were patronized by the states. The western historians made several assertions about the political conditions of India, right from beginning. No doubt personal experiences are reflected in the writings of any author. As it is obvious to say that the historians found a fact that India has always been ruled by the invaders, they started to search the origin of the kings of the past. The theory of patronizing religions set the trend that people used to follow the religion of their kings. Some of them even hypothesized that the social laws in the societies like India never evolved from the society but were imposed over the society, by the rulers. It is neither scientifically nor logically possible. Historically a state comes after society; hence the state will have to follow and respect the main culture of the society. The above assertions compelled the historians of Indian history to find the religion of the kings, to ascertain the religion of the subjects. The western historians of the British India enjoyed powerful reputation and hence were imitated by Indian scholars. Some scholars felt pride to do so. They stuck to the assertions made by British or European scholars not worried about to develop their own independent personality. They never think to verify them as they don't want to accept their folly. They never investigated to know, how by patronizing a religion by a state or king, becomes popular religion among the masses.

It can be hard to accept as universal truth that the religion followed by the king used to be a popular religion among his subjects. The question doesn't carry any relevance whether a king in monarchical form of government used to be a popular figure. Monarchies were hardly supported by the common men and were result of the will and effort of one man. Better to say that a king gained his suzerainty by force over masses. Monarchs had single agenda concerned with the collection of revenue and common men were limited to pay the taxes. Neither of them cared about personal lives of others. Question of popular acceptance doesn't arise. Was it essential qualification for a king in monarchy to be a popular person? What kind of comprehension it would be to find characteristics of a modern democracy in ancient monarchy?

To establish King Asoka, a Buddhist, may have some benefits for concerned scholars, which needn't to be discussed here. What is most important to know the cause that compelled King Asoka to teach the 'laws of Piety' his own subjects? What compelled him to spread the fundamental rules of any society vide epigraphic display. Being a political authority, Asoka's intentions would have been more political than anything else. It should be kept in minds that Asoka always used the word '*Dhamma*' which means duty, not in actual sense of English word 'religion'^[3]. If it is taken as religion, did it carry the highest importance in the concerned period? Does 'religion' carry more significance than the 'society' during the period? No doubt 'religion' brings cohesiveness to the society but a society spontaneously evolved itself under same principle of cohesion. The required cohesion here seem to had been introduced more through '*Sanghas*' than anything else^[4]. There were a number of forces that played important role to consolidate the society existing, then.

It can be the passion to lead which may lead to impose new laws and traditions in the society. It is well known ambitions of few men, to lead masses with the help of their leadership qualities. 'Religion' itself required the first preacher of the new ideology, to possess leadership qualities, who prepares the stage for propagation and expansion of ideology and enjoys supreme leadership. These religious leaders rules over soul and minds of the masses. A political power could not enjoy such a vast influence. Being a political power of a vast empire, did Asoka get attracted towards religious leadership or does He wanted to rule over the soul and mind of the masses? When I come across with this assertion made by D.R. Bhandarkar^[5] in his '*Asoka*', I, neither have the qualification nor any intention to negate him. I was a student of history and was doing my job to study each and every explanation and assertions made by historians. Even today, I don't find anything wrong in it, as it is a possible assumption.

Indeed, sooner or later, after demolition of Indus valley civilization, northern India witnessed urban revolution. I don't have stronger evidences to refuse the fact that the people of Indus valley civilization migrated towards northern India after losing their civilized settlements. They not only migrated towards east of Indus valley civilization but introduced advanced way of lifestyles to the region. It doesn't imply that people residing in northern India prior to their arrival were uncivilized. It is difficult to prove that inhabitants of northern India were uncivilized or barbaric in their attitude. Both of them were highly civilized and developed, leading to mutual cooperation between the two. Other condition may have put them into conflict, with disastrous consequences. Two developed people mixed their talents to evolve more advanced and sophisticated society, which in turn gave urbanization to northern India. New standards of life were established which were of very high morals and legality. It should be remembered that new society thus established was evolved spontaneously under guidance of one or more cohesive factors. Their seniors would have played the major and positive role in evolution of advance society. It confirms the presence of highly evolved intellectuals among both sides who were equipped with positive attitude. Due to high morals and standards they never collided, went on to achieve developments, inclusive in nature. We know that any development lacking inclusive growth never establishes a strong cohesion in the society. Each and every group or individual was benefitted by the development. It led to construction of more suitable social environment refuting any kind of destruction. Every one prospered and everyone was happy.

But prosperity brings some evils with it. Individual and mental problems were inevitable with capital gains. To overcome them, intellectuals come into scene. Lord Buddha was one of them, most successful of all. Social laws and traditions evolve themselves and undergo changes as per requirements felt by the parent society. It is an undeniable truth. Lord Buddha always said that sorrow is everywhere, every time and presented solutions to fight it. Lord Buddha never tries to establish any new 'religion' but evolved solutions to the problems of the common man. Lord Buddha preached the importance of *Sanghas*. His priority was more social than religious. He put special thrust on maintaining equality of men. The equality might have been serious threat for the contemporary society. Not due to emergence of new religious cult like Brahmanism or else, but socio-economic causes. It may be possible that some other personality would have suited more to 'religion' during the period, but Lord Buddha is the only one whose teachings are more logical and scientific in the period than any else.

Historically, wealth comes with the feelings of inequality and rigorous competitive valor. This inequality comes with economic factors and precipitates at social platform. Thinkers start to preach liberal qualities of humanity. During the period of sharp development people find no time to discuss the causes of their failures. The social conscious becomes weak. Economic prosperity never remains constant individuals lose wealth after some time. Comparatively wealthy individuals start to suffer loss, depressions surrounds them. They find solutions under intellectuals like Lord Buddha. But prosperity develops tendency to violate social laws and traditions. Prosperity gives them social respect and a peculiar kind of status, which develop a tendency to violate social laws and traditions. Sometimes they start to adopt untraditional etiquettes and customs, endangering the existing conditions of the society. Teachings of King Asoka may be seen in this context to understand causes behind it.

King Asoka banned some festivals which include killings and excessive drinking. Again He preaches hunters and others to stop killings and hunting innocent living beings. Killings develop negative tendencies among people and people become intolerant and short tempered. These tendencies are dangerous for the stability of the society. To decrease the competitive feelings among people, King Asoka advised, 'it is good to have few expenses and few possessions'. There are natural side effects being developed due to prosperity. *Mauryan* state was a vast territory. The reality of development and prosperity was the cause for establishment of such a vast territorial expansion. People possessed the vision of expansion, in all aspects of life. People were obsessed to earn and increase their assets at any cost. Due to influence of science and technology they failed to their social liabilities. Society was under threat and conditions were suitable for rise of intellectual movement under leaders like Lord Buddha. The increase of unconsciousness towards fellow men may be the cause when King Asoka advises to be sensitive towards relatives and old friends. His epigraphs do mention the conditions of excessive arrogance and self-conceit and loosing of respect for elders and old.

Excessive competition enhances the dissent and vibrancy. They start to lean towards intellectual leaders or start to follow blindly who ever gave confidence of bringing peace and satisfaction by easy means. Unfortunately, instead of following the correct measures already existing in the society, they start to look for new alternatives. It makes way for new ideologies to conquer the feelings of common men. To present old theory in slight different way or in new style, sometimes more complex forms, attracts the unstable minds with great ease. New ideologies come into existence some of them not suitable and unfavorable for the existing

society of very high standards and morals. King Asoka had read the instability of the people and took steps to control it. He stood to stop the probable mutations and alterations having adverse effects on the nature and quality of the pre-existed society. He appointed special officers like '*Dhammamahamattas*' to bring relief, in each and every cadre of the society. He asserted that soft minds were won over by these officers appointed by him on state expenditure. These soft minds were also targeted by new ideologies which were making efforts to seed favorable changes in the pre-existing social order. Asoka providently identified the objectives of the desperados. People capable of creating followers on the basis of miraculous tricks and grandiloquence were intriguing to capture vital position in the pre-existing society. Asoka appointed officials like *Rajjuka*, *Pradeshika*, etc. to stop the growing influence of new traditions and rituals which had alien origin. King Asoka had been well aware of the events taking place in the society as has made mention of it in His epigraphs. It appears that new ideologies were struggling with others for greater influence over the masses. When King Asoka advised them to avoid insulting others, hints the tough conditions of the time. It is interesting that even under such conditions King Asoka shows a very high standard of tolerance, even to the ideologies which were antonym to the nature of the pre-existing society.

As has been discussed else that all of the social laws, traditions and customs are evolved from the society. They are improved and modified simultaneously according to needs and necessities felt by the whole society. Whole process is spontaneous. It should be noted down that no supernatural power comes to make the society to realize that some laws, traditions or customs has to be imposed over them. Whatever changes take place has to be accepted by the society as whole on the basis of logic and necessity. The laws, traditions and customs of the alien society could not be fruitful if injected in to the society, which has been evolved independently. King Asoka has mentioned about '*Mangalachaars*'^[6] and has insisted that they were of no use. He believe that those '*Mangalachaars*' were irrational, ambiguous and anti-progressive. King Asoka insisted on tradition of giving instead of exercising '*Mangalachaars*'. It is not as simple as been put in to explanation by various historians. It reflects the conflict of ideologies. '*Mangalachaar*' represents an ideology different from the pre-existing ideology based on altruism, tolerance and dedication. It is not simple to state that King Asoka had been opposed to Brahmin ideology based firmly on the theory of 'Fear'. We are well aware that *Mauryan* kings had been very mighty one and it was not difficult for them to uproot any intruding alien ideology. It was the pre-existing values of tolerance that stopped the mighty King to interfere. King Asoka was trying to save those values only which denied him to take hard steps against intruding ideology. King Asoka has made a mention of the 'false Gods',^[7] which clearly indicated that there were new ideologies trying to influence the people on the theory of 'fear'. Pre-existing society was based on the ideology which never believed in fear and always denied the very existence of any invisible superpower or god.

It appears as if women became the first victim of charlatans. They were first to exercise the customs and rituals proposed by them. If women were influenced, whole society was bound to be influenced. A woman can change the whole society. Woman has powerful role in generations. King Asoka found that women were indulged in accepting and exercising useless traditions and unproductive rituals more rigorously. He has mentioned about it in his epigraphs and has recruited special officers like *Ijhithak Mahamattas*^[8] for inciting morals and values into them.

King Asoka has engraved some important Buddhist thoughts. No doubt Brahmanism was also available as a new ideology to his disposal. Buddhist thoughts were historical, scientific, logical and indigenous. Buddhist thoughts had been originated during the age of Lord Buddha and had been proved successful during the time of need. Buddhist thoughts rested on the purity of minds, fraternity and equality without fear of any supernatural power like God. Lord Buddha has denied any thing existed like God. There has been no place for discrimination or hierarchy in pre-existing society. Hence it founds more affection for Buddhism than Brahmanism. Buddhism was against any kind of privilege, hence was more humane. Brahmanism was ideology developed for interest of the few. Its theories were unrealistic, unscientific and illogical hence couldn't be proved by any human. It was essential to internalize 'fear' among the masses for spread of Brahmin ideology. 'God' and It's existence was pre-requisite for Brahmanism, and with the help of this 'fear' of invisible superpower the social laws, traditions and rituals has to be imposed over the targeted society. Brahmanism was recreating stories in resonance of the existing traditions to attract masses and thus was struggling to intrude in the society. King Asoka had only option of reminding the masses of good values and thoughts of Lord Buddha to stop contamination of the society of great traditions. King Asoka believed that the social laws and traditions which were not evolved by the society would be disastrous for their society. A society evolved on the scientific and logical grounds would be handicapped if accept the traditions of alien society.

King Asoka was well known with the fact that the values evolved spontaneously and historically could only be capable to protect efficiently the very culture of the society. He was also aware that when society

underwent serious threats, it was Lord Buddha who saved them with his scientific and logical teachings. Personal and individual problems of people were solved by following right path preached by Lord Buddha. Lord Buddha relied on science and logic but never believed to create 'fear' to make masses his follower. He did so because He was there for cure, not for gains. He never said he belonged to Heaven or was son of a God. It is difficult to establish that there were any hypothesis of God existed then. Lord Buddha refused any such existence, it is hard to state whether this concept was pre-existing or new ideologies like Brahmanism were implanting them recently. Lord Buddha taught equally for both king and poorest one. He never asked for any patronage from the kingly families. The ideology reflected in the Buddhist traditions was in resonance with the pre-existing ideology; hence Lord Buddha never needed any patronage. It couldn't be denied that the masses followed the same ideology, compelled the rulers to follow it. No doubt intellectuality is more powerful than the physical force.

It is true that *Mauryan* state was much larger than preceding state. This developing attitude reflects the power and skill. Each and every one was on equal footing on this long run. Everyone had equal right on prosperity, no one was excluded on the basis of some artificial or God made inequality or disqualification. No doubt even under such a fair atmosphere, tough competitions gave space to envy and deception, due to human quality. Such people could become an easy prey for people having miraculous qualities or false gods as mentioned by Him. That is why King Asoka asks for attempts without grudge. But people with severe conditions fell in the hands of people who believed to be having miraculous and bogus powers blessed by God. These miraculous powers were used to possess by *Sadhus* and *Rhishis* of the Brahmin traditions. These *Sadhus* and *Rhishis* did everything to influence the people and trap them into the net prepared for their captivity. The society started to witness the changes in the values and traditions. It is hard to say whether it was only Brahmins which possess these miraculous power or some more were also struggling for. If yes, counts null, as it were Brahmins who, first, succeeded to acquire throne just beside the King. Brahmin ideology lacked those qualities required for acceptance by masses. Once they got royal patronage started to impose their social laws into the society, resulting complete transformation of the values and customs of the parent society.

The epigraph of King Asoka bears social importance which has been overlooked by several scholars, including H.P. Shastri^[9]. None of the scholars felt necessity to examine the extent of influence of Brahmin ideology in the contemporary scenario. They simply propounded that King Asoka patronized Buddhism and opposed Brahmins. Later historians simply went on the footsteps of the previous scholars, never thought of challenging them. It is obscured to state that King Asoka ever said that He patronized Buddhism as 'religion', only Buddhist texts, especially those belonged to *Theravaad* insisted so. The concerned period may belong to the period when Buddhism acquired the shape of a 'religion'. King Asoka doesn't mention about third Buddhist council in His edicts but has been mentioned by Buddhist records. Same Buddhist records avoided to mention the incidence of *Kalinga* war that changed King Asoka completely. It is not difficult to know the probable cause behind it.

It couldn't be established that teachings of Lord Buddha were pre-existing, but could be exerted with certainty that it resembled the pre-existing ideology to greater extent. Lord Buddha consolidated them in to society. Brahmanism was struggling to overcome and expand at any cost. When King Asoka realized the threat, He didn't hesitate to deploy imperial machinery to stop it. It was not because of any religious zeal, as has been mentioned by some scholars. King Asoka dedicated *Barabara* caves to non-Buddhist ascetics.^[10] Any feeling of 'religion' in the contemporary period is doubtful; '*Dhamma*' can't be taken as 'religion'. It was political effort to save outstanding features of the pre-existing society and its indigenous character. It may be assumed that the King's effort might have started new trend of getting support of state for expansion of religious control over the masses. But Buddhism didn't find any necessity as it was widely accepted and practiced philosophy. When King Asoka says that he was more successful by means of pursue than making laws, reflected the character of very society. It was difficult for new ideology to get accepted by masses without testing them scientifically and logically. King Asoka was there to protect this quality of the people. He was afraid that some of the new ideologies like Brahmanism may distort the character of the society by introduction of superstitions, idolatry, bigotry and inequality. The society gets divided on the name of God and start to follow blind fatalism. King Asoka sought 'violence' as the most debilitating feature of the new ideologies. He went to the extent of banning such activities which encourage the violence. *Kalinga war* has influenced King Asoka, when he was overwhelmed by the integrity and dedication of *Kalingans*, the outstanding feature of the contemporary Indian society. He believed that pre-existing qualities of the Indian society might be protected and for that He shouldn't be blamed for religious favor of one or other cult. It was entirely for the cause of social values and pre-existing traditions of the society.

III. CONCLUSION

The major concern of King Asoka was to save the values of the pre-existing society. He believed that the standard of the pre-existing society was of very high level. It was indigenous and most suitable as its values and customs were self evolved. New ideologies, some of them belonged to distant and barbaric environment could have been non-suitable to the society. Hence He identified them and stood for safety of the society. It will be wrong to assume that King Asoka propagated any religious ideology. He was for safety of the society, whose traditions were reflected in the ideology of Buddhism. Buddhism was evolved from the indigenous values, customs and traditions, most suitable for the society. Hence the teachings reflected in the edicts of King Asoka were totally social in nature and nothing has to do with any religion. No doubt concept of cult was prevalent but concept of 'religion' was irrelevant.

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