

# Reflection of Humanism in the Edicts of Ashoka

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## Abstract

Humanism – a belief in the capabilities and powers of human as a maker of his fate and future, this emerged as a strong belief during renaissance period when the focus of art shifted from divine to human. However, in Indian history, we find the principle of humanism embedded in ancient scriptures and politics. Ashoka, the most humane ruler not only of Indian but of world history took the path of Dharma which ultimately led to humanism. His inscriptions engraved on rocks, boulders, cave wall pillars of stone clearly announce to the world his firm belief in human values – compassion, peace non violence and religious tolerance. His ideal of kingship was paternal kingship. His humanism was not unconditional as he threatens unruly forest people and schism creators in stern language in his edicts.

**Keywords** Paternal kingship, inscriptions, Humanism, Dharmma, Renaissance

### Introduction

Maurya dynasty is known in the history of India as the only empire which created the scientific frontiers of India. Mauryas were preceded by the Nandas. From the Greek writings of Curtius, Diodorus and Plutarch it's evident that Nandas were of low origin. Even Jain sources Avashyak sutra, Parshisht-Parvan also ditto this statement. Nandas were cruel and unpopular among the subjects due to their ruthless nature and oppressive taxation. They were called Adharmik (unrighteous) when Chandragupta Maurya overthrew Nandas and thus proved to be liberator of the people of Magadha empire.

### Discussion

The concept of Humanism is of recent origin which focus on the powers and capabilities of human to shape their future. It sticks to the individual freedom and rights and includes good feelings towards all men without any discrimination. The term humanism got popularity in renaissance period when the focus of art shifted from Divine to human. The word humanism of Latin origin means advanced knowledge. Humanism means to take interest in Man's life to study problems related to mankind and to accept the value of human life and pays attention to this world then super natural world. Paitarch, the father of Humanism was the first one who made worldly affairs as the basis of his literacy creation<sup>1</sup> not like western model of humanism, constituents of humanism as human dignity, human welfare are embedded in India's spiritualistic approach and its different phases of history.

India is an ancient society but a modern state she has largely been tolerant society embracing people of different religion. Assimilation of different communities, tribe and religion in Hinduism is witness to great human values of Indian culture. In many ways, our culture has emphasised some of the fundamental human values. In Rigveda, the oldest scripture we find in sukta sixty in Mandal five which states "No one is superior or inferior, all are brothers, all should strive for the interest of all and should progress collectively.

Manav dharma is key feature of Humanism if we go through ancient Indian history, human values are included in religious scriptures and administrative policies of kings. Human's values are closely associated with fundamental aims of human life mentioned in Dharmashastra called Purushartha – Karma, artha, dharma and Moksha that's quest for Pleasure, wealth, Righteousness and Salvation. The ancient Indian legal philosophers were universalists, humanistic and rationalists and above all moralist who evolved system of legal theory. The basis human rights was dharma – the ideal of socio-legal order free from traces of conflicts. Dharma was the controlling factor for common folks as well as kings also. Kautiliya in his Arthashastra asserts "In the happiness of subjects lies the happiness of King, what is beneficial to the subjects is his own benefits". King's function was not conceived in terms of legislation but of protection from invasion and creating order in the society. Kautiliya in his arthashastra not only asserted civil and legal rights but also add economic rights. He proclaimed that King shall provide the orphan, the aged, the infirm, the

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helpless with maintenance, he shall also provide subsistence to the helpless, expected mothers and also to the children they gave birth to.”

Mauryan rulers are famous in Indian history for carving out a vast empire by military conquests and annexation of the conquered areas. But once the conquered area becomes their territory, administration was established and the emperor himself strove hard to supervise administration. Megasthenese described hectic schedule of emperor. We come across the fact that Ashoka in his 6<sup>th</sup> major rock edict Asoka says that he must promote the welfare of the whole world which he considered the best work and for this he instructed his messengers (Pattivedkas) should keep him touch with Public business or to inform him about any important matter of the empire even if he is in his inner chamber or in his pleasure garden.

Ashokan inscriptions are the oldest written document to peep into administrative set up of Ancient India. Ashoka's policies as reflected in his edicts are mainly concerned with reforms, he instituted and the moral principles he recommended in his attempt to create a just and humane society.

Ashoka's ideals of kingship include welfare of all beings.<sup>4</sup> The paternalistic ideals are reflected in his rock edicts I and II which states

“ All men are my children as with regard to my own children. I desire that they may be provided with all kinds of welfare and happiness in this world and the next, I desire the same for all men.” Features of humanism can be traced in Asoka's administration. Ashoka believed that King owed the debt to all living beings, probably he is the only King in Indian history who shows his concern for the people of not only his empire but of those also living beyond the borders of his empire.

Moreover, he ensured not only welfare of human beings but of animals too, Moreover he is concerned with happiness of his people in this world and the next too. In his Rock edict II he mentioned the hospitals established for men and animals not only in empire but in neighbouring states like Satyaputtas and Kerelaputtas. In the second Rock edict he refers to having made provisions for medical treatment, planting beneficial medicinal herbs, roots and fruits and digging of wells at interval of eight Kos. Ashoka's paternalism was not unconditional. He is humane but not in every condition. In his rock edict XIII although Ashoka states remorse for having unleashed terrible violence against Kalinga yet on the same time he seems to justify it when he states that such killing of life, forcible carrying away of life becomes inevitable when an unconquered area was conquered<sup>5</sup> in same edict he sternly addresses the forest tribe ordering them to repent and not to expect forgiveness for what could not be forgiven Ashoka's Dharmma explained in this inscription emphasized mutual respect and understanding among people of different sects. His Rock edict XII set forth the principles of religious toleration and constitute one of the noblest document in human history as it promotes the essentials of all sects and religious concord.

Ashoka was concerned that administration should be for the welfare of people for this purpose Dharma Mahamatras were appointed by Ashoka who were entrusted with the job of checking the abuses in the administration of justice, helping people in the upliftment of the people through propagation of Dharna, Ashoka's Dharna explained in his inscription emphasised non-violence, mutual respect and understanding between people of different sect.

Ashoka did not make provisions for the worldly welfare of his subjects but he was worried to improve their spiritual well being also. In his 4<sup>th</sup> pillar edict he instructed that men who are imprisoned or sentenced to death are to be given three days respite, thus their relation may plead for their lives or if there is no one to plead for them, they may make donations or undertake a fast for better rebirth in their next life. Ashoka banned killings of certain animals even he seems to be concerned about the living places of animals or livelihood of forest tribes as he declared that forest must not be burnt unnecessarily

**Objective of Study**

To analyse the spirit of Humanism in Ashoka's policies as depicted in his edicts

**Conclusion**

Ashoka sets a very high ideal of kingship that was the ideal of paternal kingship. We find in his edicts that he treated his subjects as his children.<sup>10</sup> H.G. Wells, the

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British author aptly remarks about him "Among tens of thousands of Monarchs, Ashoka shines almost like a star."<sup>11</sup> Ashoka taught people to live and let live.

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