

Ashoka's Dhamma as Ethical Statecraft: Political Authority, Moral Governance, and Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract

The study critically examines the legacy of Emperor Ashoka and retrospectively explores the political and philosophical underpinning of Dhamma policy spread by Ashoka. Ashoka and his life demonstrate the one of the most nuance transformative ruler of ancient Indian has been pioneered a renowned model of governance that blended moral philosophy with statecraft's. So far as Ashoka Dhamma are concerned it's not just a religious doctrine but a detailed outlet of ethical principal for aiming to promote the social harmony, tolerance, non-violence and welfare of common mass. This paper examines how his policies sought to established moral order transcending sectarian boundaries through the analysis of his inscription, rock edicts, historical interpretation's and simultaneously addressing the political stability in his imperial unity. Article further engaged the retrospections of Ashoka Dhamma in contemporary context, and its relevance in modern governance to be highlighting the intercultural dialogue and diplomacy and peace-building approach. Through inclosing Dhamma as a pragmatic tool of administrative and visionary ethical paradigm efforts and to underscore Ashoka's enduring influence political philosophy and cultural diplomacy across the Asian continent. Finally, studies contribute the debates of ethics, governance and universal values in historical and modern perspectives.

Key Words: Ashoka legacy, Dhamma Policy, Ethical Governance, Moral statecraft, Intercultural Diplomacy

Introduction

Ancient and pre-modern ruler and their system of rule of state structure can be categorised in three distinct type. Ruler who acquires land and exercise authority over them and state through violence, war and force are the first category, they use force on people, make them slave and subhuman & become tyranny. Rulers who expand their realm through territorial conquest and make alliance with other ruler to counterbalance the opposition ruler and impose their views to others is the second category; they become dominant and provide the basic necessity of the people but disregard the good life of people. Third ruler is who rule neither by violence, force & tyranny nor by alliance and domination. He tries to rule through love, compassion and Maitri

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Published: 28 January 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i1.30788>

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and expand his political, cultural and intellectual leadership. He builds a political ethic which accommodate the world view of his subject that is, finding a common ground for the good life from different group and integrate them into the political ethics. He promoted dialogue among diverse group within his realm and territories, once he found general political ethics he assumes the role of its protector. “Ashoka, who ruled in the third century BCE in India is probably the first leader in the world of this third kind, Knowledge about him comes from his inscription or edict that lie scattered in more than thirty place throughout India, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan” (Bhargava, 2023, pp. 96-97). He Advocate to build a governance model rooted in political legitimacy rather than coercive power.

The legacy of Emperor Ashoka holds a significant place in political, ethical, and moral imagination of the Indian subcontinent. Ashoka as a ruler transformed the ideology of kingship from conquest (Digvijaya) to grounded in moral governance (Dhammavijaya). He ruled roughly 368 to 232 BCE during the Maurya Dynasty. Ashoka inherited the Empire from his father Bindusara who was the son of Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Empire. He offers a unique perspective through which to understand the philosophical evolution of statecraft in ancient India. He was dedicated to the core values of Dhamma which stress upon the non-violence, compassion and tolerance. “Ashoka aimed to rule not only with military might but also with moral leadership, He promotes principle like religious tolerance, respect for all life and the well-being of all his subject by writing a number of edicts on rock and pillar around his realm” (Saini, 2023, p. 105). These policies were not just simply policy they were revolutionary policies which make shift in governance to mediate conflict, promote justice and to expand the welfare of people of diverse and stratified society.

In contemporary time, Ashoka’s Dhamma has got relevance in modern state which face complex challenges such as growing social divide, moral crisis in governance, rising inequalities, breach of faith. Many people consider Ashoka’s region to be the heyday of Indian history, marked by a boom in trade, art and culture. His administrative measure and regulation gave a foundation for a governance model that is grounded in ethics and civic responsibility. After his passing even, his legacy and impact continue to influence the Indian history and polity. His principle of moral government compassionate leadership is still relevant today. Retrospectively examining Ashoka’s principle provide not only historical insight but also a normative framework for rethinking public policy through the lens of ethical statehood and citizen welfare.

This paper will examine the legacy of Emperor Ashoka by Retrospectively analysing the his Dhamma policy from rock edicts inscription, and historical interpretation. This paper investigates how Dhamma policy work as an administrative tool and visionary ethical tool. This paper seeks to contribute the debates of ethics, governance and universal values in historical and modern perspective

Methodology

The examining Ashoka’s legacy and his farmworker of Dhamma policies the research has adopted a qualitative and historical-analytical methodology. Primarily the source has been adopted the Ashokan rock edicts and inscription and archaeological evidence form the

foundational data which providing the insights into the ethical and administrative dimension of Ashokan rule. These sources are critically understood alongside secondary materials such as, scholarly work, historical commentaries, and modern interpretations of Ashoka's governance. While a comparative lean is efforts to analysis the Ashoka Dhamma both as political apparatus for his imperial integration and moral framework to promote the tolerance, harmony and non-violence. Studies also employs the retrospection by situating Ashoka policies within the contemporary debates on governance, intercultural ethics and peacebuilding approach.

Dhamma as a model of Ethical governance: state responsibility, welfare, moral authority

Nature has given many kings and emperors to history. Still, some of them were very distinct. They established themselves and their kingdoms on the foundation of genuine democracy. They became a milestone for the happiness and prosperity of their subjects, which power forces in the world cannot perish. The real identity of Great India lies in the great empire of Asoka. Samrat Ashoka had vigorous patronage of three jewel Buddhas, Dhamma and Sangha, during his sovereignty from 265 to 238 BC and led the moment to spread Dhamma, the Buddha message, across India. Great "Asoka" is merely one of the most significant empires that have given up the wars which indulged in bloodshed and led to a meaningful spirit to triumph over the whole world without bloodshed through Dhamma means love, peace, and compassion such as curved personality to place in every heart of all peoples and serve and renounce the Dhamma the right to life for each human being and further extend the form of compassion towards the animals to prohibited the hunting wildlife and declares no body kills animals and don't starve in a fire. He was the first legendary empire to open an animal hospital. An instance from Thangata Gautam Buddha's life and his teaching Believing in sacrificial offering rituals, etc., is not a part of the Dhamma that the dialogue which took place between Tathagata Gautam Buddha and "Kutadanta" Brahimi's and Buddha teach "Kutadanta" Brahmin the animal sacrifices a distorted form of Dharma. Buddha told the Brahmin that in any Yajna, bulls should not be killed, and the sacrifices of goats, hens-Cock, fat pigs and any other animals should not be offered. Slaughter pillars should not be made, trees must not be felled indiscriminately, and promote the (Metta) Maitreya melt with compassionate heart with all creatures. Only then will it be considered a meaningful Yajna (Ambedkar,1957). This is how Dhamma play a crucial role in morality and ethics of state.

The hills of Girinar are situated at a distance of about 1 mile from Junagadh in the Kathiawar district of Gujarat, what Girinar Rock Edict of Asoka said Pali.

"Iyan Dhammalipi Devanampriyen Priyadarshini raaja ekhaapita ith na kin chi jeevan aarabhitya prajoohtavyan na ch samaajo katavyo bahukan hi dosan samaajamahi paasati devaanaampriyo priyadaasi raaja asti pi tu ekacha samaaja saadhomata devanan priyas priyadaasino raajo pura mahaanasamahi Devanampriyen priyadaasi raajino anudivasan bahuni pranasatasahasraani aarabhisu subaathaay se aj, Yada ayam dhammalipi likhita ti eva prana aarbhare supathaya dvo mora eko mago so pi mago na dhruvo ate pi tri prana pacha na arabhisare.

This Dhamma text was written by Devanam Priyadarshi King. Here no animal should be killed haven should be performed and neither should any society be organised. Because Devanam Priya Priyadarshi King sees many faults in society. In this way also one type of society is virtuous in the opinion of Devanam Priya Priyadarshi King. Earlier in the kitchen of Devanam Priya Priyadarshi King several lakhs of animals were killed for soup every day but today when this religious text was written only three animals are killed- two peacocks and one deer. Even that deer is not (certainly). These three animals will also not be killed later.

He has firmly stood with intrusting the prohibition of all social defilements in their contemporary juncture. On the grounds of Dhamma, Asoka constantly declares the practice of socio-moral virtues of honesty, compassion, truthfulness, and benevolence towards all beings and extended their empire through noninjury, non-acquisitions and non-extravagances the grounds of Dhamma in a firm sense teaching of Tathata Gautam Buddha. Indeed, he spoke about Dhamma as an original Pali, instead of using the blurry sense of religion, creeds, or sects but particularly provocation of pure commitment to Dhamma for all being meant to “*Sheel Sadacharan’s*” modest way of life teaches the virtue which is driven from Dhamma. It could be understood and acknowledged that when the king of the nation is virtuous, follows the policies of Dhamma, and considers everyone equal or equitable, his subject principally lives a life of happiness and prosperity. The great Ashoka built his entire life according to the teachings of Buddha and created his nation as a united India based on virtues, good conduct, friendship, compassion, joy, etc.

Dhamma policy and early practice of Global Diplomacy

Asoka’s Dhamma policy also influenced his national policy and established relations with his neighbours based on the principles of peace and coexistence. Ashoka was well aware of the importance attached to foreign states. Asoka has firmly established inter- and intra-regional security and prosperity in cartography, leading to a thriving geopolitical landscape. Throughout the “Dhamma Niti”, Democracy and friendly relations were established with the states situated on the western and southern borders of the empire. An Egyptian king “Ptolemy Philadelphus” who was a contemporary of Asoka, sent his ambassador to the court. History of Chandragupta (Chadagupata) Maurya. He was glorious about the friendly relationship between Seleucus and the dynasties and the pairing of envoys, which Chandragupta or Bindusara succeeded in. “The Seleucids ceded some of their eastern territories, mainly in modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan (including Gandhara), to the Mauryan in exchange for 500 elephants, an animal unknown in Asia outside of the subcontinent” (Truschke, 2025). Ashoka’s pilgrimage inscriptions show that there were his religious preachers in the fifth Yavana state aiming to preach the “Dhamma Niti” to them. Asoka’s preachers had some success in the Yavana state. In his second edict of Ashoka, it is said that he had made separate arrangements for studies and medical treatment in the States. He was also a preacher of his Dhamma in four Tamil states on the southern border, Chola, Pandya, Satyaputta and Keralaputta, Tamra Parni- Lanka. The Chinese traveller “Huiian Tsang” has told us that he had one stupa built by Asoka in the Chola and Pandya states.

During their time or before, many foreigners lived in Pataliputra, necessitating the formation of a special committee under municipal management to look after the visitors’ needs.

The century Asoka lived, in particular, was characterised by ongoing interactions between the Eastern Mediterranean and South Asia. As a result, most of Asoka's contacts were with people from South Asia and the West. It appears that this was not a one-sided interest. Their main goal was to familiarise the countries they visited with his policies, especially his Dhamma policies. They can be compared to modern goodwill missions in that they help to temper people's interest in the ideas and peoples of the countries from which they came. The fragmentary Aramaic inscription at Taxila and another from Kashmir indicate that intercommunication between the two areas is ongoing. In the north, the use of Kharosthi in the Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra edicts demonstrates intense contact with Iran. Also see Mane Garden Inscription: In this, Asoka describes his acquisitions with the people from other places of his empire, such as the description of the agreement between the Greek and Indian citizens, which can be seen in this inscription.

Apart from these Western contacts, according to legend, Asoka is said to have visited Khotan. Ashoka, on the other hand, maintained close ties with modern-day Nepal. According to legend, his daughter, Charumati, was said to have married Devapala of Nepal. The Mauryan empire included the province of Vanga in the east, and since Tamaralipi was the area's main port, Indian missions to and from Ceylon are said to have passed through Tamaralipi. In South India, the extent of Asoka's power is better documented than in northern India. At Gavimathi, Palkignuda, Brahmagiri, Maski, Yerragudi, and Siddapur, Asoka's edicts can be found. Asoka had a close relationship with Ceylon's ruler, Tissa. Ashoka and Tissa had a friendship built on mutual admiration. What were the country's interests or Asoka's goals served by his missions? Asoka's primary goal was to spread his Dhamma; he and his followers may have been developing an interest in Dhamma. He claimed to have spiritually conquered all of the territories he specified and a few more beyond them.

Foreign aid in the service of diplomacy is well known even in modern times. Likewise, Asoka is called Jambudvipa which means the dhamma should not be limited to their territory but must be spread over the world, thus he conceived of it as a worldwide mission. Asoka uses the term "*Duta*" modern to governance means ambassadors for larger missions sent by one to another Rock Edict XIII. Interestingly these were not normal diplomats but had a special charge to the mission of converting the rulers and peoples according to the Asoka Cult of Dhamma. Much of the emphasis was placed on flourishing their foreign mission to assist their neighbours could be underlined in the Ashoka dhamma policy about Medicine diplomacy. Asoka sent medical practitioners along with their medical knowledge and the plants and herbs needed for the preparation of medicines. Throughout his Rock Edict II, he sought to establish two kinds of medical services first one for humans second one for animals⁵. How much importance has given to Wherever medicinal herbs beneficial to humans and domestic animals were not found, he had them brought in and planted everywhere.

In a comparable manner where vegetable and fruits tree were lacking, Ashoka made ensure their importance and made widespread planting. Also, importance was given to planting the trees alongside with road and wells dug for the benefit of domestic animals and human beings (Olivelle, 2023). The understanding has been laid down about the flourishing of medicine becoming a concert source to boost their relations and for their neighbours to invite

to take advantage of the methods of medicine because such as herbal medicine was not developed in their neighbours like the Greek king named Antiochus, and other kings who are that Antiochus's. The development of empirical medical science and practice within Buddhism and in the heartland of the Maurya empire may have been a source of pride for Asoka. The author has analysed through the scrutiny of the sources from the 9th century B.C.E. to the beginning of the common era revealing that Within Brāhmaṇic social order, medical practitioners were given a stigmatized position and denied to participate in orthodox rituals due to the notion of pollution occur from socially impure bodies. Later onwards Portions of the repository of medical lore were codified in early monastic rules, thereby giving rise to a Buddhist monastic medical tradition (Zysk, 1991).

For incitements harmony among various sects, “he had the order to appoint the Dhamma Minsters in the 5th Major Rock Edict in which “Asoka” refers to the appointment of “Dharma Ministers” (*dharma-mahāmātras*): They are busy in all sects, establishing *Dhamma*, increasing the interest in *Dhamma*, and attending to the welfare and happiness of those who are devoted to *Dhamma* among the Greeks (*Yonas*), the Kambojas, the Gandhārans, the Risthikas, the Pitinikas, and the other peoples of the west”⁷. Also, one of the most diplomatic missions is through the monks and nuns and has pali literature such as attribute the conversation of Sri Lanka “Mahinda and Sanghamitta” son or daughter of Asoka sent to Ceylon. The well-organised society and government system that we imagine today was so advanced in the times of Asoka and he ordered his subjects to love the people, not punish them without crime, a good system should be made for the progress of all and the legal system should be improved to prevent crime and extend the compassion towards the humans and animals. As the propagation of Dhamma spread far and wide range, their devotion and enthusiasm towards Thangata Gautam Buddha and Dhamma increased due to which mutual mediations and trade increased and the society progressed could be accessed for common mass. Asoka significant order to their peoples, through the “*Maata Pitari Susumam*” inscription, is based on Mangal Maitreya taught by Thangata Gautam Buddha, such as serving parents and elders, respecting the Teacher (Guru) and not doing any wrong, doing so brings auspiciousness and one gets four benefits like an increase in age, complexion, happiness and strength (Vipassana Research Institute, 2007). Ashoka’s development was based on the ethics and morality, compassion.

The Enduring Relevance of Ashoka’s Ethical Governance

Throughout his pillar inscription, it can be understood how Asoka was devoted to serving the welfare of peoples, such as Planting banyan and mango orchards and constructing verandas and wells every 800 metres (1/2 mile) of the road - Pillar Inscription 7. Encouragement to obey parents, generosity towards Brahmanas and Sramanas, and not to spend unnecessarily-Major Rock Edict 3. Prohibition of killing animals in the royal kitchen; becoming a vegetarian himself and urging his subjects to adopt vegetarianism - Major Rock Edict 1. Provide medical facilities for humans and animals, plant medicinal plants everywhere in the provinces, and import plants unavailable from other countries - Major Rock Edict 2. Instructing officials to work for the welfare and well-being of low-income and aged people - Major Rock Edict 5. Promoting the welfare of all beings to repay one’s debt to them and work for their happiness in this life and the next - Major Rock Edict 6. There is another appeal for tolerance among sects. According

to this chapter, no one should criticise their own Dhamma, nor condemn the Dhamma of others. All religions should be respected - 12 Major Rock Edicts.

Asoka's many rock Edicts or scripture have mentioned two terms, "Sharman and Brahman", to be respected, revered and served to them; doing so is an auspicious deed. But the question has been raised that it can be understood that Sharman means to those who follow and practice the teaching of Tabatha Gautam Buddha-like "*Sheel Sadacharan*" means Panch-Sheel or Vinaya but Brahman means whom, the unique definition is given by Tabatha Gautam Buddha through the Dhammapada the teachings of the Buddha in Brahmana Vago Chapter XXVI, to understand by couple of "*Gatha*".

"Having striven, cut off the stream, dispel sensualities, O Brahmana, having known the dissolution of the samskaras, a knower of the unmade are you, O Brahmana". The person who is detached and who is composed and free from attachment and who has overcome the world may be considered as Brahmana. Those kind of person are fully conscious of rebirth and death and still remain detached, has achieved the state of sugata where the individual is fully awakened, these are the individual whom I call Brahmana. Through this, it is understood that one's being a Brahmin, his qualification, quality, and virtue continue efforts to "Nibban" enlightenment, purity of mind, speech, and body and concentration of the mind not just due to birth (The Dhammapada, 2022). Mind and Moral teaching was very much central to Buddha.

Prominent scholar Romila Thapar has been arguing and concerned through "Ashoka a Retrospective" that Ashoka is ignored or reduced to a mere name in the dynastic lists of the Puranas. A "Mayamoha" is used for the Tathagata Gautam Buddha and Mahavira in the Puranas because they were deluded and deliberately deluded others. Over time, the tradition, with its many legends, has accompanied the spread of Buddhism to various parts of Asia. "Ashoka emerged as the Chakravarti of the Buddhist world beyond the subcontinent. But in India, he received little mention" (Thapar, 2009, 31-37). Yet even if he had been marginalised as a ruler, the question remains whether his ideas and attempts at a particular form of governance were part of discussions on kingship and ethics. Famous scholars like Charles Allen said that through new evidence, "it can be understood the intense, deep roots of Buddhism in India, despite colossal force even persecuted and branded as atheists by Brahmans and persecution by various Hindu rulers, Buddhist followers of "Thangata Gautam Buddha", has not only flourished in India for many centuries but continued to survive in some parts of the subcontinent as late as the 12th century" (Jayswal, 2025, p. 208). And later spread to all over the world.

Great Asoka left a cascading impact on the long journey of Indian history. In every field of cultural religion, where can we see the effect of his unique ruler on the long history of India? It has an unseen legacy of Asoka which we can call universal character he has been experiencing moral philosophy Dhamma bases governance was a unique method and methodology he has successfully applied. It would not be enough if we left our great ancestor without understanding and today, we can see that we get to see a copy of his wealth and legacy through the national flag or national emblem or many others. But this is not enough in reality. Why are these symbols there? Because Asoka was. We must inculcate Ashoka's real Dhamma polity into our modern statecraft for a moral order and ethical authority. Through his efforts and messages, he created a personality or cult with Dhamma a moral expression of his

personality, with our dedication, devotion and surrender towards it, we should try to bring that great ancestor back to reality. It's not new in history to propose an utterly dismal picture of a legendary personality later or sooner. The reality came back as Buddha said through their teaching Dhammapada three things cannot be hidden: sun, moon, and truth; likewise, our great ancestor Priyadarshi Asoka would not be overshadowed forever. This Indian lost empire tells a fabulous journey of a man who has excellent rule in India has ever known. Prominent scholar Charles Allen talks about Asoka's legacy as the pioneer of united India. The Asoka quest to govern India by Dhamma means understanding (moral force). His efforts turned into Buddhism from a minor sect into a global religion and set up a new yardstick for the actual means of government and governance. However, history has shown that these bold experiments led by Asoka ended with tragedy because they needed more attention and were forgotten for two thousand years. He aims to "*Sheel Sadacharan, Jivan Sanmarga*" to follow every person of this land, which is the real sense of Dhamma, to connect Sariman Sanskrit and eradicate cultural deformities, such as inequality or prejudice. Asoka works on the real culture of this land and forms a new realm on the grounds of Dhamma and his efforts to deal with a serenity or pious form of culture that makes harmony from community to community and people to people.

Conclusion

This study has examined the legacy of Emperor Ashoka by critically evaluating the political and philosophical foundation of the Dhamma policy as articulated by rock edict, inscription and historical interpretation. This study argues that Ashoka Dhamma can't be seen just as a religious doctrine rather it is a normative framework of governance that incorporate the ethical principle with administrative practice win the Mauryan Empire system. "The profound transformation of Ashoka after the Kalinga war simply can-not be ignored & interpreting his Dhamma policy just as religious act is to underestimate his political genius" (Jayswal, 2025, p. 208). Ashoka period shows a significant historical moment in the evolution of ethical statecraft in ancient India.

The finding of the study highlight that Ashoka adopted Dhamma as a tool of social harmony, non-violence, co-operation, simultaneously reinforcing for political stability and imperial unity, through moral encouragement and welfare-oriented policies, respect for religious plurality. He tried to gain legitimacy through ethical conduct rather than coercive authority. Though his edicts scattered in many places, He want to make people moral, compassionate and respect for life by the principle of Dhamma such as non-violence, filial piety, proper behaviour towards elder and relatives and respect towards ascetic and all religious sect (Medhacittoet, Pannaloka , & Barua, 2024). The inscription of his time reveals that he was making effort to both moral responsibilities of the ruler and civic duty of the subject, thus helping to establish a moral order that rose above sectarian and regional divide. The objective of the Dhamma policy and Dhamma diplomacy is to make people practice the following righteous teaching. This dhamma doctrine accommodate a universal moral law which was important for the society. His teaching was for all living being irrespective of religion.

Moreover, the restropescetive engagement with Ashoka's Dhamma highlights its continue relevance in contemporary discussion on governance, ethics and public policy. He transformed his power from coercion to moral persuasion, this is considered as menifestation

of what we call soft power for the diplomacy in the ancient world . Ashoka political vision such as tolerance, dialogue, and moral accountability being used as a tool to address modern challenges of governance in plural society. His peaceful coexistence and intercultural approach provide historical evidence on intercultural dialogue and non-violence approach to political authority. The Mauryan Empire survived for almost 136 years but after Ashoka's demise, it started decline because of weak successor, economic pressure and growing autonomy of regional force. "Ashoka's grandeur rested not only in the size of his empire and his ability to administer it successfully, but also in his character and the idea and goal he strive to uphold as a king, as a result , Ashoka is not just one of the India's greatest kings, but also one of the world" (Kumar, 2021, pp. 392-393). He is the first king who took many different initiative for the welfare of his people of his own territory by constructing the hospital, wells, and road, and many welfare project.

The study contribute to existing literature of the Indian history of Ashoka Dhamma within broader debate on political legitimacy , ethical governance and normative political thought. By bridging the historical analysis with contemporary concern. His approach accommodated personal ethics with the requirement of political authority . Ashoka was well aware that for persistent rule he needs beyond mere armed strength, this seek a cohesive framework. So the Dhamma doctrine can be understood as an effort to create an imperial state by dhamma policy not through armed conquest. But sustained by a collective dedication to a righteous and human social arrangement. It continue to represent one of the most vital historical example of the power of ideology in unifying and consolidating an imperial polity. All the initiative and principle taken by Ashoka remain foundational for the national betterment and effective nation building till present day.

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