

# Administrative Reform under Emperor Ashoka: The Great Reign

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## **Abstract:**

This research paper examines Samrat Ashoka life, about his reign, administration, welfare of animals and humans, and journey from hardcore achiever of empire to promoter of Dhamma and contributions of Emperor Ashoka.

The Samrat Ashoka who Conquered Hearts, Not Lands. Who showed how a suitable Emperor one can be. He was very keen to know the vulnerabilities faced by citizens of his empire.

Before Kalinga war he was accomplisher but after seeing huge loss in Kalinga war Ashoka adopted the principles of Dhamma, emphasizing non-violence, moral governance, religious tolerance, and public welfare. After Kaling war, he made himself people oriented rather than power oriented.

The study explores the administrative structure of his empire, the organization of society, agricultural development, and measures undertaken for the welfare of both humans and animals. Special attention is given to his efforts in promoting irrigation facilities, road construction, healthcare services, and social harmony among diverse communities.

The study unfolds his journey of Dhamma, Buddhism. His mainly focused was on maintaining peace across region.

Through his edicts and policies, Ashoka sought to establish ethical governance and ensure the well-being of his subjects. The paper concludes that Ashoka's reign represents a significant period in Indian history, marked by effective administration, social progress, and the promotion of humanitarian values. His legacy continues to be recognized as an example of enlightened and welfare-oriented leadership.

**Keywords:** Ashoka, Mauryan Empire, Dhamma, Administration, Agriculture, Social Structure, Welfare, Kalinga War, Non-violence, Buddhism.

## **Objectives**

- To study the life of Ashoka and rise of Samrat Ashoka.
- Impact of Kalinga war.
- To examine how Ashoka changed from a conqueror to a ruler who promoted peace.
- To study Ashoka's administrative system.
- To study the life, administration, religious policies, and historical contributions of Samrat Ashoka and to assess his impact on Indian civilization.

### Introduction – Historical background

Samrat Ashoka was one of the greatest rulers of ancient India and the third emperor of the Maurya Empire. He ruled from around 268 BCE to 232 BCE. He was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, who founded the Maurya Empire, and the son of Bindusara.

Under Ashoka's rule, the Maurya Empire became one of the largest and most powerful empires in Indian history.

In the early years of his reign, Ashoka was fond of a policy of military expansion.

His most important military campaign was the Kalinga War, fought around 261 BCE. Although Ashoka won the war, the heavy loss of life and suffering deeply affected him. According to historical records and his own inscriptions, this experience led him to adhere to non-violence and adopt a policy based on peace, compassion, and moral governance.

After the Kalinga War, Ashoka embraced the teachings of Buddhism and promoted the principle of Dhamma, which emphasized non-violence, justice, kindness, religious tolerance, and respect for all living beings. Instead of expanding his empire through warfare, he focused on the welfare of his people by building roads, hospitals, wells, rest houses, and other public facilities.

Ashoka communicated his policies through inscriptions engraved on rocks and pillars. These inscriptions, known as the Edicts of Ashoka, provide valuable information about his administration, moral philosophy, and concern for public welfare. They remain among the most important primary sources for understanding ancient Indian history.

Ashoka's reign marked a turning point in the political, social, and religious history of India. His ideals of ethical governance, religious harmony, and public welfare influenced later generations and contributed to the spread of Buddhism to regions such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, and other parts of Asia. Today, Ashoka is remembered as a symbol of righteous leadership.

### **Social administration**

#### **Ajivika Sect**

Ajivika is a Sanskrit word. It is an ancient Nastik or Heterodox school. They believed in destiny. For them whatever is happening in life success, failure, suffering, happiness is predetermined. Human effort, hard work, prayers cannot change what is already written.

Ajivika sect was founded by Makkhali Gosala. Ajivika believed in Niyati. Ajivika is built on foundation of absolute fatalism or determinism.

#### **1) Ashoka's Royal support**

Ashoka was in strong support of Buddhism, but he never oppresses other sects.

He gave royal support to Ajivikas and donated caves for their monks. The Ashoka dedicated some caves to Ajivika ascetics like Barabar caves in present day Bihar and Sudama cave. The inscription carved in Sudama cave records Ashoka's donations to the Ajivikas.

Ajivikas enjoyed royal support in Mauryan period because some historical references suggest that Bindusara, Ashoka's father was particularly favourable toward Ajivikas.

Seventh pillar edict says that he ordered his officials called Dhammamahamatras to help and supervise different religious groups, including the Ajivikas so that they were treated fairly and lived in harmony.

Many historians and research papers indicate that Samrat Ashoka was an early follower of Ajivikas tradition before Kalinga.

## 2) Background before Kalinga war

Before Kalinga war, Ashoka was known as Chandashoka (Ashoka the Fierce). He was ruthless, very ambitious towards expanding his kingdom. He built Ashoka's Hell, he created torture chambers which was built especially to torture and kill the prisoners. From this behaviour he was seen as ill-tempered and haughty by nature.

Ashoka fought many minor and major wars against territories. His reign stretched from Assam in the East to Balochistan in the West; from Pamir knot in Afghanistan in the North to the Peninsula in South India.

## 3) The Kalinga War

The Kalinga war was fought between Ashoka and Raja Anantha Padmanabhan from the state of Kalinga. He fought Kalinga war one of the biggest wars of his life after he became ruler.

Kalinga was a peaceful, beautiful region consisting of skilled and artistic people.

The land was prosperous, rich and abundant with natural resources.

Kalinga was once ruled by Magadha during the rule of the Nanda Dynasty. However, when the Maurya empire came to power, Kalinga became independent again.

Maurya rulers wanted to gain power and reputation hence they fought this war. They wanted to take control as soon as possible: this is the main reason why Ashoka decided to attack Kalinga.

Kalinga soldiers fought bravely. Ashoka and his soldiers were difficult to defeat, and they were large in numbers. Though people of Kalinga fought hard but at the end they were defeated and had to surrender.

Many people lost their lives; it was a massive destruction happen because of the war. Over 150,000 Kalinga warriors and 100,000 warriors from Ashoka's side were killed in this battle.

## 4) Embrace of Buddhism

He witnessed a heavy loss of life due to this war. It is said that the Daya river at Bhubaneswar turned red with the warrior's blood, which was situated next to the battlefield.

He experienced great agony. In the dark intoxication of the power, many people's lives were at stake. By seeing the loss which was outcome of the war he realised that from war we only get power which is momentary as well as perishable. Damage caused by war is not something which is helpful in betterment of populace. Hence, he abandoned aggressive militarism. He embraced Buddhism and follow principles of non-violence, compassion and moral governance.

## 5) Influence of Dhamma policies in social administrations.

In the context of Mauryan Empire and the rule of Ashoka, the term "Dhamma" has a special political, ethical and social meaning.

Dhamma is derived from Sanskrit word "Dharma". For Ashoka, it meant a universal moral law and code of conduct for peaceful living and good governance.

After the Kalinga war, Ashoka became deeply influenced by Buddhist ideas and prompted Dhamma as the foundation of his empire.

According to Ashoka's inscriptions and edicts, Dhamma included respect for elders, non-violence, truthfulness and moral behaviour, care for animals, welfare measures like roads, wells, hospitals and trees.

Ashoka divided territories in provinces. He divided vast empire into five administrative parts, and these five parts were led by Patliputra.

Central authority is supreme of all; there were five layers. The Prachya (central) governed by Patliputra.

Urarapatha with capital Taxila (Northern India, including the region of middle east, Afghanistan and southeastern Iran) governed by prince as representative of Ashoka.

Avantirastha(western) capital at Ujjain stretched from Zahedan of Balochistans to whole Malwa plateau including Kandahar, Pakistan, Rajasthan and Gujrat.

Dakshinapatha (southern) capital at suvarnagiri. Kalinga (Eastern province) capital at Tosali.

Ashoka retained the centralized administrative system of the Mauryan Empire but gave special importance to accountability, supervision, and public welfare. To govern his vast empire effectively, he divided it into four major provinces and appointed royal princes and senior officers as provincial governors. He developed a strong bureaucratic system by creating different departments and appointing officials to carry out state policies efficiently. The Mahama as were appointed to conduct regular inspections and ensure proper administration and welfare measures in the provinces. Provincial officers and councils assisted the governors in local administration. Ashoka also maintained an efficient spy network that monitored provincial governments, checked corruption and misuse of power, and regularly informed the emperor about administrative affairs. This helped strengthen central control and ensure smooth governance throughout the empire.

Emperor, who was prior to Ashoka, was power and authority oriented. The rulers such as Alexander, Demetrius, Philip, Selucus, is well known for military conquest but not administration like Ashoka. Ashoka was mainly focused on welfare of people, Humanity. He broke the cycle of emperor's mentality where military conquest, power, money, political position is secondary and welfare of society, nonviolence, social harmony and peace is the priority.

He builds an institution in such a way that public related issues, state affairs would be reachable to him even if he is busy with his personal activities, that kind of reach he build so that not a single matter would go unanswered.

## **Social Fabric and Culture**

The reign of Ashoka marked a significant period in the social and cultural history of ancient India. After embracing Buddhism following the Kalinga War, Ashoka promoted values such as compassion, non-violence, tolerance, and moral conduct throughout his empire.

### **1. Social Structure**

The society during Ashoka's time was organized according to the traditional varna system. However, Ashoka gave importance to ethical behavior and respect for all individuals rather than social divisions. His edicts encouraged kindness toward servants, elders, teachers, and people of different social groups.

### **2. Religious Tolerance**

Although Ashoka became a follower of Buddhism, he did not impose it on his subjects. Instead, he advocated respect for all religions. His inscriptions emphasize harmony among followers of different faiths, including Brahmanism, Jainism, and Buddhism. This policy strengthened social unity and reduced religious conflicts.

### **3. Promotion of Moral Values**

Ashoka introduced the concept of Dhamma, a code of ethical conduct based on truthfulness, compassion, non-violence, and respect for others. Through rock and pillar edicts, he encouraged citizens to lead virtuous lives and contribute to social welfare.

### **4. Welfare of humans and animals**

The emperor undertook several welfare activities for the benefit of society. He ordered the construction of roads, rest houses, wells, and hospitals for both humans and animals. These measures improved the quality of life and reflected his concern for public welfare.

## 5. Cultural Development

Ashoka's reign witnessed remarkable cultural growth. He supported Buddhist architecture and art, leading to the construction of stupas, monasteries, and pillars across the empire. Notable examples include the Sanchi Stupa and the Ashokan pillars, which became symbols of Indian heritage.

## 6. Spread of Buddhism and Cultural Exchange

Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries to various regions, including Sri Lanka, Nepal, and parts of Central and Southeast Asia. These missions facilitated cultural exchange and helped spread Indian ideas, art, and religious traditions beyond the subcontinent.

## Economic Administration under Samrat Ashoka

The economic administration of Ashoka was based on the strong administrative framework established by the Mauryan Empire. Ashoka focused on maintaining economic stability, promoting trade, improving agriculture, and ensuring the welfare of his subjects.

### 1. Agricultural reform and development

Agriculture was the primary source of income during Ashoka's reign. The state encouraged cultivation through irrigation projects, and the construction of wells.

Ashoka promoted the construction and maintenance of irrigation systems such as canals, wells, and reservoirs. Improved water availability increased agricultural productivity and reduced dependence on rainfall.

According to his inscriptions, wells were dug along roads and in rural areas. These facilities benefited both farmers and travellers, supporting cultivation in dry regions.

Plantation of Trees was encouraged in his reign. Some animals spared from slaughtering and due to this change this animal was used in agricultural activities.

### 2. Revenue and Taxation

The government collected revenue mainly through land taxes, which were generally a portion of the agricultural produce. Other sources of income included taxes on trade, customs duties, mining activities, forests, and various industries. The revenue system was carefully regulated to ensure efficient collection while avoiding excessive burden on the people.

### 3. Trade and Commerce

Internal and external trade flourished under Ashoka. Well-maintained roads, rest houses, and security arrangements facilitated the movement of goods across the empire. Trade links extended to regions such as Sri Lanka, Egypt, and parts of West and Central Asia. Merchants played an important role in economic growth and cultural exchange.

### 4. State authority on Resources

The Mauryan state exercised supervision over important economic resources, including mines, forests, and certain industries. Government officials monitored production and trade to maintain quality, regulate prices, and prevent exploitation.

### 5. Public Welfare and Infrastructure

Ashoka invested state resources in public welfare projects. Roads, wells, shade trees, rest houses, and medical facilities for humans and animals were constructed throughout the empire. These measures improved transportation, trade, and the overall standard of living.

## 6. Administrative Officials

A network of officials supervised economic activities and revenue collection.

They ensured proper management of agriculture, trade, public works, and taxation.

Efficient administration helped maintain economic order and support the vast empire.

## 7. Organized Structure of Society under Ashoka

Society was broadly organized according to the traditional varna system: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Various occupational groups and communities existed within this framework.

The empire was governed through a well-organized administrative system headed by the emperor. Provinces, districts, and villages were managed by appointed officials.

The family was the fundamental social institution. Respect for parents, elders, teachers, and relatives was strongly encouraged in Ashoka's edicts.

Artisans, merchants, farmers, soldiers, and officials formed important sections of society. Trade and craft guilds contributed to economic and social organization.

The society under Ashoka was highly organized, with a strong administrative structure, village-based economy, and diverse religious communities. Through his policy of Dhamma, Ashoka promoted moral values, social harmony, religious tolerance, and public welfare, contributing to the stability and unity of the Mauryan Empire.

## Conclusion

Emperor Ashoka administrative reforms represent an important development in the history of ancient Indian governance which was a different experiment in ancient world history of Monarchy system. After the Kalinga War, Ashoka gave greater importance to Dhamma, justice, tolerance, and the welfare of his subjects. His administration put great emphasis on responsible governance through the supervision of officials, fair treatment of people, and measures for public welfare such as medical facilities, roads, wells, and other public amenities & animal welfare .

Appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras by him and Ashoka's efforts to promote social harmony and religious tolerance reflected his broader vision of ethical administration. Even though Mauryan Empire remained centralized, Ashoka introduced a distinctive moral dimension to kingship by emphasizing that the ruler had a responsibility towards the well-being of his people. Ashoka's administrative reforms demonstrate an early effort to combine effective governance with ethical responsibility and public welfare. His ideas continue to hold historical significance as an important example of humane and welfare-oriented administration in ancient India & a strong inspiration for Modern India foundation.

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