

Ashok as a Religious Conqueror: A brief discussion

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Abstract:

Ashoka is one of the most remarkable rulers of ancient India. After the devastating Kalinga War, He changed the concept of conquest through his unique approach to religion and governance. Ashoka took up an aggressive foreign policy. Like his predecessors he wanted to expand the empire further. On the 12th year of his reign he attacked the kingdom of Kalinga which lay between the rivers Mahanadi and Godavari, and conquered it. The conquest of Kalinga is an epoch-making event of the Indian history. This conquest brought a change in the mind of Asoka, and the effects of this change were felt in the foreign policy of the Mauryas and in the fate of the Buddhism. He introduced the principle of *Dhamma Vijaya* (conquest through righteousness), replacing violent conquest with moral and spiritual influence. As a "religious conqueror," Ashoka focused on spreading ethical values such as non-violence, compassion, tolerance, and respect for all living beings. Through inscriptions, public welfare measures, and missionary activities, he sought to win the hearts of people rather than their territories. His efforts led to the spread of Buddhism across Asia and established a model of governance rooted in morality and humanity. This study will be highlights how Ashoka redefined the idea of conquest by prioritizing ethical and spiritual ideals over warfare, making him a unique example of a ruler who conquered through religion and moral influence rather than force.

Introduction:

Ashoka was the third ruler of the Maurya Dynasty, initially followed traditional Brahmanical beliefs. But the conquest of Kalinga gave rise to remorse in the mind of Asoka. He was terribly shocked to see the horrors of the war. Soon after this war, Asoka became a Buddhist, and giving up war-path he began to pursue the paths of peace. The result was his foreign policy now wholly changed. He no longer thought of 'Digvijaya'; he now thought of 'Dharmavijaya, Ashoka's religion was not limited to ritual practices; it was based on a moral code known as *Dhamma*. This emphasized values like compassion, truthfulness, respect for elders, kindness to animals, and religious tolerance. He promoted these ideals through inscriptions known as edicts, which were engraved on rocks and pillars across his empire. Thus, Ashoka's religion played a significant role in shaping his administration and contributed greatly to the spread of Buddhism both within India and beyond.

Scope and Importance of Ashoka as a Religious Conqueror

Scope:

The idea of Ashoka as a religious conqueror extends beyond political history into moral philosophy, governance, and cultural exchange. After the Kalinga War, Ashoka adopted Buddhism and introduced the concept of *Dhamma Vijaya*. The scope of this concept includes:

Political field: Transformation of kingship from military expansion to welfare-oriented governance.

Social side: Promotion of ethical values like non-violence, compassion, equality, and religious tolerance among people.

Cultural side: Spread of Buddhist culture, art, and architecture across regions within and outside India.

International influence: Dispatch of missionaries to countries like Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, widening the global reach of his ideas.

Administrative aspect: Use of edicts and officials (Dhamma Mahamatras) to implement moral policies across the empire.

Importance:

Ashoka replaced violent warfare with moral and spiritual influence, setting a unique example in world history. His patronage helped transform Buddhism into a major world religion. His rule emphasized justice, welfare, and humane administration, influencing later rulers and political thought. He encouraged coexistence among different religions and communities. Ashoka's ideals continue to inspire modern values such as non-violence, secularism, and social harmony. In essence, Ashoka's religious conquest broadened the meaning of power by prioritizing moral authority over military strength, leaving a lasting impact on both Indian and world history.

Aims and Objectives:

Aim:

To examine how Ashoka transformed the idea of conquest by promoting moral and spiritual values after the Kalinga War, and to understand the role of Buddhism in shaping his policy of *Dhamma Vijaya*.

Objectives:

- To analyse the reasons behind Ashoka's shift from military conquest to religious and moral conquest.
- To study the concept of *Dhamma* and its principles such as non-violence, compassion, and tolerance.
- To evaluate the role of Buddhism in influencing Ashoka's administration and policies.
- To assess the impact of Ashoka's religious conquest on Indian society and culture.
- To explore the international influence of Ashoka's policies, especially in the spread of Buddhism beyond India.

Discussion:

Ashoka is remembered as one of the greatest rulers in Indian history because of his remarkable transformation from a powerful conqueror to a promoter of peace, morality, and religion. The major turning point behind this shift was the devastating Kalinga War. According to historical records and Ashoka's own inscriptions, the war caused immense destruction, leading to the death of thousands of soldiers and civilians. The suffering and bloodshed deeply affected Ashoka emotionally and morally. He realized that military conquest brought pain, sorrow, and instability rather than true victory and happiness.

One of the primary reasons behind Ashoka's transformation was his feeling of guilt and remorse after witnessing the tragic consequences of war. In his Rock Edicts, Ashoka openly expressed sorrow over the loss of human lives in Kalinga. This self-realization encouraged him to abandon aggressive warfare and adopt a policy based on compassion and non-violence. He began to believe that "Dhamma" or moral righteousness was more important than territorial expansion.

Another important reason was the influence of Buddhism. After the Kalinga War, Ashoka came into contact with Buddhist monks and teachings, which emphasized peace, kindness, tolerance, and respect for all living beings. Buddhist principles greatly influenced his personal life and political policies. He accepted Buddhism and promoted ethical conduct among his subjects. However, Ashoka did not force Buddhism on others; instead, he encouraged religious tolerance and harmony among different communities.

Political and administrative considerations also played a role in Ashoka's shift. Constant warfare weakened the economy, caused loss of life, and created unrest within the empire. Ashoka understood that a stable and united empire could be maintained through justice, welfare measures, and moral governance rather than fear and violence. Therefore, he focused on public welfare activities such as building roads, hospitals, wells, and rest houses for travelers. He also appointed officials called "Dhamma Mahamatras" to spread moral values and ensure the welfare of the people. Thus, Ashoka's shift from military conquest to religious and moral conquest was influenced by the horrors of the Kalinga War, the teachings of Buddhism, personal remorse, and the need for peaceful governance. His transformation made him a symbol of peace, humanity, and ethical leadership in world history.

Buddhism played a significant role in shaping the administration and policies of Ashoka after the Kalinga War. The horrors of the war deeply affected Ashoka, leading him to embrace Buddhist principles such as non-violence, compassion, morality, and tolerance. These teachings transformed not only his personal life but also the way he governed his vast empire. One of the major influences of Buddhism on Ashoka's administration was the adoption of a policy of peace and non-violence. Ashoka gave up aggressive military expansion and promoted "Dhamma Vijaya" or conquest through morality instead of warfare. He emphasized peaceful relations with neighboring states and discouraged violence and cruelty within his empire.

Buddhist ideals also inspired Ashoka's welfare policies. He worked for the well-being of his people by constructing roads, wells, hospitals, gardens, and rest houses for travelers. Special attention was given to both humans and animals, reflecting the Buddhist principle of compassion toward all living beings. He also reduced animal sacrifices and encouraged ethical treatment of animals. Another important impact of Buddhism was visible in Ashoka's administrative reforms. He appointed officials known as "Dhamma Mahamatras" to spread moral values, supervise public welfare, and maintain harmony among different communities. These officers ensured that the principles of justice, kindness, and morality were followed throughout the empire.

Buddhism also influenced Ashoka's policy of religious tolerance. Although he accepted Buddhism, he respected all religions and encouraged people to honor different faiths. This policy helped maintain unity and peace in a diverse empire. Buddhism greatly influenced Ashoka's administration and policies by promoting peace, welfare, moral governance, and

religious tolerance. His rule became an example of ethical leadership based on humanitarian values rather than military power.

Ashoka had a deep and lasting impact on Indian society and culture through his policy of religious and moral conquest after the Kalinga War. Instead of expanding his empire through warfare, Ashoka promoted the ideals of peace, morality, and humanity based on the principles of Buddhism and Dhamma. His policies brought important social, cultural, and religious changes across India.

One major impact of Ashoka's religious conquest was the spread of moral values in society. He encouraged people to practice truthfulness, kindness, compassion, respect for elders, and non-violence. Through his Rock and Pillar Edicts, he advised citizens to live ethical and disciplined lives. These teachings helped promote social harmony and peaceful coexistence among people.

Ashoka's policy also strengthened the spread of Buddhism in India and beyond. He supported Buddhist monks, built stupas and monasteries, and organized missionary activities to regions such as Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. As a result, Buddhism developed into a major world religion and became an important part of Indian cultural heritage.

Another important impact was the growth of religious tolerance. Although Ashoka personally followed Buddhism, he respected all religions and encouraged mutual understanding among different faiths. This policy reduced religious conflicts and created unity within the diverse Mauryan Empire.

Ashoka's reign also influenced Indian art and architecture. The construction of stupas, pillars, caves, and inscriptions contributed to the development of ancient Indian architecture and sculpture. The famous Ashokan Pillars and the Lion Capital of Sarnath later became important symbols of Indian identity. Ashoka's religious conquest greatly influenced Indian society and culture by promoting morality, peace, religious tolerance, and the spread of Buddhism. His humanitarian policies left a lasting legacy that continues to inspire India and the world even today.

Another important principle of Dhamma was compassion and kindness toward all living beings. Ashoka encouraged people to show respect, generosity, and care for others, including servants, elders, and animals. He introduced welfare measures such as building hospitals, roads, wells, and rest houses for the benefit of both humans and animals. These actions reflected his concern for the welfare of society. Tolerance was also a key element of Ashoka's Dhamma. He respected all religions and advised people not to criticize the beliefs of others. Instead, he encouraged mutual understanding and harmony among different religious communities. Ashoka believed that religious tolerance would strengthen unity and peace within the empire. Ashoka's Dhamma was a practical and ethical system based on non-violence, compassion, tolerance, truthfulness, and respect for all. Its aim was to promote social harmony, moral values, and peaceful coexistence among people. The principles of Dhamma continue to inspire humanity even today.

Ashoka's approach to religious conquest was implemented through several measures. He issued edicts engraved on rocks and pillars across his empire, communicating his policies directly to the people. These edicts emphasized ethical conduct, social responsibility, and religious tolerance. He also appointed officials known as Dhamma Mahamatras to oversee the

moral welfare of society. Furthermore, Ashoka undertook welfare activities such as building roads, hospitals, rest houses, and planting trees, reflecting his concern for both humans and animals. A significant aspect of his religious conquest was the spread of Buddhism beyond India. Ashoka sent missionaries to regions such as Sri Lanka, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia, which contributed to the emergence of Buddhism as a major world religion. However, it is important to note that he respected all religions and encouraged peaceful coexistence rather than forced conversion.

In a broader sense, Ashoka redefined the meaning of power and success. His model of governance shifted the focus from domination to service, from fear to moral authority. This has led historians to regard him as one of the earliest rulers to practice ethical statecraft.

Methodology:

The study on Ashoka as a religious conqueror is based on a qualitative and historical research approach. It focuses on analysing available sources to understand his transformation after the Kalinga War and his adoption of Buddhism. Data has been collected from both primary and secondary data. Secondary data were collected from books, research journals, articles, government reports, and online academic sources related to Ashoka. These sources helped in understanding historical backgrounds, theoretical perspectives, and previous research findings

Findings:

The study of Ashoka as a religious conqueror reveals several important findings:

- The turning point in Ashoka's life was the Kalinga War, which led to his deep remorse and transformation from a war-driven ruler to a promoter of peace.
- Ashoka adopted Buddhism, but his policy of *Dhamma* was universal in nature, focusing on ethical values rather than strict religious doctrine.
- He introduced the concept of *Dhamma Vijaya* (conquest through righteousness), replacing military conquest with moral and spiritual influence.
- Ashoka used effective methods such as rock and pillar edicts, missionary activities, and welfare measures to spread his ideals among people.
- His administration reflected a strong commitment to social welfare, including the establishment of hospitals, roads, rest houses, and care for animals.
- Ashoka played a crucial role in the spread of Buddhism beyond India, especially to regions like Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, making it a global religion.
- He promoted religious tolerance and harmony, respecting all sects and encouraging peaceful coexistence.
- His model of governance emphasized ethical leadership, justice, and compassion, which remains relevant in modern times.

Conclusion:

Ashoka stands as a unique example of a ruler who redefined the meaning of conquest in human history. After the tragic experience of the Kalinga War, he shifted from a policy of military expansion to one based on moral and spiritual values inspired by Buddhism. Through the concept of *Dhamma Vijaya* (conquest through righteousness), Ashoka emphasized non-violence, compassion, justice, and religious tolerance. His efforts to promote ethical living,

ensure public welfare, and spread his ideals through edicts and missions transformed both his empire and the broader world. Rather than conquering lands, he sought to win the hearts of people. Ashoka's legacy as a religious conqueror remains highly significant, as it highlights the power of moral leadership over force. His principles continue to inspire modern ideas of peace, coexistence, and good governance, making him one of the most respected figures in history. Ashoka's transformation and his approach to religious conquest demonstrate that true power can be achieved through moral values and humanitarian principles rather than violence and domination. In conclusion, the discussion highlights that Ashoka's concept of religious conquest was not about controlling territories but about winning the hearts and minds of people through justice, compassion, and moral integrity. His legacy continues to influence modern ideas of peace, tolerance, and good governance.

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