

## INTERROGATING ASHOKA'S DHAMMA THROUGH THE SANATANA LENS: A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr Umesh Kumar<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sr Associate Professor, Swami Shraddhanand college, University of Delhi

umeshdb09@gmail.com<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (c. 268–232 BCE) stands as a colossus in Indian history, primarily due to his prolific edicts that propagate a moral and ethical code known as his *Dhamma*. Traditional historiography has often painted Ashoka as a benevolent, pacifist monarch who, remorseful after the Kalinga war, embraced and championed Buddhism. This paper seeks to critically interrogate this monolithic narrative by analyzing Ashoka's Dhamma through the theoretical framework of the *Sanatana* (Sanskrit: *Saptanga*), or the "Seven Limbs" of the state, as articulated in ancient Indian political treatises like Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. By examining the Major and Minor Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts, this study argues that Ashoka's Dhamma was not merely a personal spiritual quest or a purely Buddhist undertaking, but a sophisticated and calculated political ideology designed to consolidate and legitimize imperial power. It functioned as the ideological glue binding the disparate elements of the Sanatana—*Swami* (the ruler), *Amatya* (the bureaucracy), *Janapada* (the territory and populace), *Durga* (the fort), *Kosha* (the treasury), *Danda* (the army/coercion), and *Mitra* (the ally)—into a cohesive, stable, and centrally controlled empire. This paper will deconstruct the edicts to reveal how the Dhamma was strategically deployed to address the inherent vulnerabilities within each "limb" of the state, ultimately serving as a tool for statecraft, social control, and the creation of a hegemonic political order.

**Keywords:** Ashoka, Dhamma, Sanatana, Mauryan Empire, Kautilya, Arthashastra, Political Ideology, Imperial Legitimation, Edicts, Ancient Indian Statecraft.

### 1. Introduction: Beyond the Pacifist King—The Problem of Ashoka

The discovery and decipherment of the Brahmi script in the 19th century unlocked the voice of one of history's most remarkable rulers: Ashoka Maurya. His inscriptions, carved on rocks and pillars across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, present a philosophy of governance centered on *Dhamma* (often translated as "piety," "righteousness," or "moral law"). The dominant narrative, heavily influenced by Buddhist sources like the *Ashokavadana* and early historical interpretations, canonized Ashoka as the "beloved-of-the-gods" who renounced violence after the brutal conquest of Kalinga and dedicated his life to non-violence (*ahimsa*) and the welfare of his subjects (Thapar, 1997).

However, a critical reading of the edicts, divorced from later hagiographical accretions, reveals a more complex figure. The Dhamma propagated by Ashoka is notably nonsectarian. While he expresses personal reverence for the Buddha, the Sangha, and the *Dhamma* (in the Buddhist sense), the public Dhamma of his edicts is a secular ethical code emphasizing obedience to parents, respect for elders and teachers, generosity towards Brahmins and ascetics, compassion towards all living beings, truthfulness, and minimal expenditure and accumulation of wealth (Sircar, 1975). This deliberate ecumenism raises a critical question: Why would a ruler, presiding over a vast and incredibly diverse empire, invest immense resources in propagating such a seemingly apolitical moral code?

This is where the Sanatana theory provides a powerful analytical tool. Coined in the *Arthashastra* and other *Dharmashastras*, the Sanatana model conceptualizes the state as an organic entity composed of seven interdependent and indispensable elements (Kangle, 1986):

1. *Swami* (The Sovereign): The king, the central authority.
2. *Amatya* (The Ministers/Officials): The administrative bureaucracy.
3. *Janapada* (The Territory and Populace): The land and its people, the source of revenue and strength.
4. *Durga* (The Fortified City): The centers of administration, security, and economy.
5. *Kosha* (The Treasury): The financial resources of the state.
6. *Danda* (The Army/Coercive Power): The means of enforcement and defense.
7. *Mitra* (The Ally): Foreign policy and strategic alliances.

A state's health and stability were believed to depend on the strength and harmonious interaction of these seven limbs. This paper posits that Ashoka's Dhamma was the master strategy intended to strengthen each of these components. It was an ideological project aimed at creating a self-regulating, docile, and productive populace (*Janapada*), a loyal and efficient bureaucracy (*Amatya*), a legitimized and centralizing sovereign (*Swami*), and a stable economic base (*Kosha*), all while reducing the need for overt coercion (*Danda*) and securing the frontiers through moral suasion rather than constant conflict (*Mitra*).

This study will proceed by first outlining the Sanatana theory as detailed in the *Arthashastra*, establishing it as the contemporary political paradigm. It will then undertake a systematic analysis, correlating the tenets of Ashoka's Dhamma with each of the seven limbs to demonstrate how the edicts functioned as instruments of state policy. Finally, it will conclude by reassessing Ashoka's legacy, arguing that his Dhamma was a brilliant, if not entirely unique, fusion of ethical philosophy and realpolitik.

## 2. The Sanatana Theory: The Anatomical Blueprint of the Ancient Indian State

Before interrogating Ashoka's Dhamma, it is essential to understand the political theory that likely informed the Mauryan court. While the dating of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* is debated, with some scholars placing it contemporaneous with or just after the Mauryas, it undoubtedly synthesizes pre-existing ideas on statecraft. The Sanatana model was the prevailing conceptual framework for kingship and governance.

Kautilya, in the *Arthashastra* (as cited in Kangle, 1986, p. 121), states: "The state [*Janapada*] is the ruler [*Swami*] together with the other elements: the minister [*Amatya*], the country [*Janapada*], the fort [*Durga*], the treasury [*Kosha*], the army [*Danda*], and the ally [*Mitra*]."

A brief elaboration of each limb is necessary:

- *Swami (The Sovereign)*: The king is the head of the body politic. His primary duties (*rajadharma*) include protection of the subjects, dispensing justice, and ensuring the prosperity and stability of the state. His personal virtues—such as energy, intelligence, spirit, and lineage—were considered crucial for the state's well-being (Singh, 2008).
- *Amatya (The Ministers/Officials)*: This refers to the entire administrative machinery, from the chief minister (*Mantrin*) to the revenue collectors (*Samahartri*), scribes, and spies. Their competence, loyalty, and integrity were vital for implementing royal policy and maintaining day-to-day governance.
- *Janapada (The Territory and Populace)*: This dual concept encompasses the physical land, with its resources like agriculture and mines, and the people inhabiting it. A prosperous,

content, and loyal populace was the foundation of the state's economic and military power. Social harmony (*samaja*) was a key administrative goal (Thapar, 1997).

- *Durga (The Fortified City)*: These were not just military garrisons but nodal points of administration, trade, and craft production. Capitals like Pataliputra were Durgas par excellence, serving as the symbolic and functional heart of the empire.
- *Kosha (The Treasury)*: The financial sinews of the state. Wealth, primarily accumulated through taxes, was essential for paying the army and bureaucracy, funding public works, and maintaining the royal establishment. Kautilya famously stated, "All undertakings are dependent on finance" (Kangle, 1986, p. 65).
- *Danda (The Army/Coercive Power)*: This represents the state's monopoly on legitimate force. The army was necessary for defense, expansion, and internal security. *Danda* also implies the power of punishment, the rod of law that ensures social order and compliance with royal decrees.
- *Mitra (The Ally)*: In the complex geopolitics of ancient India, foreign policy was critical. A reliable ally could provide military support, act as a buffer against enemies, and facilitate trade. Alliances were strategic tools for enhancing state security.

The strength of the state was seen as a product of the synergistic strength of all seven limbs. A weak king could destabilize a strong bureaucracy, and a depleted treasury could cripple a large army. Ashoka's Dhamma, as we shall see, was a comprehensive program aimed at addressing the weaknesses inherent in this complex organism.

### 3. Interrogating Ashoka's Dhamma Through the Sanatana Lens

This section will deconstruct the edicts to demonstrate how the Dhamma was strategically tailored to reinforce each component of the Sanatana.

#### 3.1. Dhamma and the *Swami* (The Sovereign): The Legitimation of Power

The most fundamental challenge for any ruler is legitimizing their authority. For Ashoka, a grandson of Chandragupta who founded the empire through military might, this was paramount. The Dhamma became the central pillar of his royal identity and legitimacy.

- From Conqueror to Righteous Ruler: The famous Rock Edict XIII, which describes the Kalinga war, is not simply an expression of remorse. It is a powerful piece of political rhetoric. By publicly renouncing further military conquest (*dig-vijaya*), Ashoka effectively redefines the very concept of kingship. He declares that the only true conquest is the "conquest by Dhamma" (*dhammavijaya*) (Dhammika, 1993). This brilliantly transforms his potential weakness (renunciation of war) into a source of unparalleled moral authority. He is no longer just a powerful king; he is a world-emperor (*Chakravartin*) whose authority stems from righteousness, not just the sword (Thapar, 1997).
- The "Beloved-of-the-Gods" Persona: Ashoka consistently uses the title "*Devanampiya*" (Beloved-of-the-Gods) and "*Piyadassi*" (He who looks after the welfare of others). This creates a divine or divinely-sanctioned aura around his person and his office (Sircar, 1975). His directives are not merely royal commands but the pronouncements of a morally elevated, paternalistic figure concerned with the spiritual and material welfare of his "children" (the subjects).
- The King as a Moral Exemplar: In Pillar Edict VII, Ashoka details his personal efforts in propagating Dhamma, stating he has "placed the promotion of the good of all as his chief duty" (Dhammika, 1993, p. 12). He presents himself as a tirelessly working, accessible monarch. This image of the compassionate, hardworking king stands in stark contrast to

the potentially arbitrary and despotic ruler, thereby strengthening the moral and political authority of the *Swami*.

In essence, the Dhamma provided Ashoka with a new and potent source of legitimacy that transcended the traditional bases of power like lineage or military success, directly strengthening the most critical limb of the Sanatana.

### **3.2. Dhamma and the *Amatya* (The Bureaucracy): Ensuring Loyalty and Efficiency**

The Mauryan Empire was a vast, centralized state with a complex bureaucracy, from the provincial governors (*Kumaras* and *Mahamatras*) down to the local record-keepers. Ensuring their loyalty and preventing corruption was a perennial challenge.

- The *Dhamma-Mahamatras*: Ashoka's most direct intervention in the bureaucratic apparatus was the creation of a new class of officials, the *Dhamma-Mahamatras* (Officers of Dhamma), first mentioned in Rock Edict V. Their mandate was to "promote the Dhamma and to look after the welfare and happiness of those devoted to Dhamma" among all sects (Dhammika, 1993, p. 7). This was a masterstroke.
  - Supervisory Role: These officers acted as the moral police and the eyes and ears of the emperor, reporting directly on the conduct of other officials and the populace (Thapar, 1997).
  - Conflict Resolution: They were tasked with settling disputes and ensuring social harmony, thus preempting situations that would require the intervention of the regular, potentially corrupt, judiciary.
  - Loyalty Enforcement: By inculcating Dhamma, which emphasized loyalty to the king, these officers worked to create a bureaucracy that was ideologically aligned with the center (Fitzpatrick, 2008).
- Ethical Instructions: Edicts like Rock Edict VI mention Ashoka's "officers of the city" (*Nagarika Vyavahara*) and his instructions for them to be impartial and avoid jealousy and anger (Sircar, 1975). The Dhamma's emphasis on truthfulness, efficiency, and compassion was a code of conduct for the *Amatyas*, aiming to create a self-policing, efficient, and loyal administrative corps.

Thus, the Dhamma was integrated into the very structure of the administration, functioning as a tool for central control and quality assurance within the bureaucratic limb.

### **3.3. Dhamma and the *Janapada* (The Populace): Engineering a Harmonious Society**

The *Janapada*—the people—was the source of the empire's wealth and stability. A discontent, rebellious, or socially fragmented populace was the greatest internal threat. Ashoka's Dhamma was meticulously designed to engineer social harmony and create compliant subjects.

- Promoting Social Virtues: The core of the Dhamma, as outlined in Rock Edicts III, IV, IX, and XI, is a list of social virtues: obedience to parents, liberality to friends, companions and relatives, to Brahmins and Shramanas, abstention from killing living beings, and minimal expenditure and possession (Dhammika, 1993). This was a recipe for a stable, patriarchal, hierarchical, and economically prudent society. A society where children obeyed parents and subjects obeyed the king was inherently stable (Thapar, 1997).
- Managing Religious Conflict: The Mauryan Empire encompassed a multitude of sects—Brahmanism, Jainism, Ajivikas, Buddhists, and others. Sectarian conflict was a direct threat to public order. Ashoka's Dhamma directly addresses this. Rock Edict XII is a monumental decree on religious tolerance. He urges all sects to "exercise control over their speech" and to respect the doctrines of others, emphasizing that the essence of all religions

is "self-control and purity of mind" (Dhammika, 1993, p. 10). This was not modern secularism but a pragmatic imperial policy to neutralize a potent source of social friction. A harmonious *Janapada* was a productive and non-rebellious one (Singh, 2008).

- Welfare as a Tool of Control: Ashoka's famous measures of planting trees, digging wells, and establishing medical facilities for humans and animals (Rock Edict II) are often cited as evidence of his benevolence (Dhammika, 1993). While genuine compassion may have been a factor, from a Sanatana perspective, these were investments in the *Janapada*. A healthy, well-nourished population is more productive, pays more taxes, and is less likely to revolt. Welfare was a strategic tool for maintaining the health of this critical limb (Fitzpatrick, 2008).

**Table 1: Dhamma's Prescriptions and their Sociopolitical Objectives for the *Janapada***

Edict Reference	Prescription of Dhamma	Intended Sociopolitical Outcome
Rock Edict III	Obedience to parents, respect for elders & teachers	Reinforcement of patriarchal hierarchy and social order (Thapar, 1997).
Rock Edict IV	Non-violence ( <i>Ahimsa</i> ), compassion for all beings	Reduction of social violence and conflict; promotion of agrarian stability (Fitzpatrick, 2008).
Rock Edict IX	Criticism of popular rituals, emphasis on inner virtue	Redirecting resources from Brahmanical rituals to state-approved ethical conduct (Thapar, 1997).
Rock Edict XI	Generosity towards Brahmins & Shramanas	Co-opting the priestly and ascetic classes, ensuring their support for the regime (Singh, 2008).
Rock Edict XII	Respect for all religious sects ( <i>Samavaya</i> )	Prevention of sectarian conflict, promotion of social harmony and unity (Sircar, 1975).



Pillar Edict VII	Animal protection laws	Conservation of economic resources (cattle, wildlife); promotion of a settled agrarian society (Fitzpatrick, 2008).
------------------	------------------------	---

### 3.4. Dhamma and the *Kosha* (The Treasury): The Political Economy of Righteousness

A depleted treasury could bring the entire imperial edifice crashing down. The Dhamma had direct and indirect implications for the economic health of the empire.

- **Frugality and Wealth Accumulation:** The Dhamma's emphasis on "little expenditure and little accumulation" (Rock Edict III) had a clear economic logic (Dhammika, 1993). While encouraging frugality among the people, it implicitly justified the state's own accumulation of wealth. If the populace was frugal, more surplus could be extracted as taxes without causing widespread discontent. Furthermore, Ashoka's own claims of reduced royal household expenditure (Pillar Edict VII) served as propaganda to legitimize taxation (Thapar, 1997).
- **Redirecting Resources:** By criticizing "useless" and "vulgar" popular ceremonies and festivals (Rock Edict I, IX), Ashoka was indirectly attacking the economic power of Brahmanical priests who benefited from such rituals (Dhammika, 1993). The wealth that would have gone to these ceremonies could now be redirected into the state's coffers or into state-controlled welfare projects that enhanced royal legitimacy.
- **Productive vs. Unproductive Expenditure:** The animal protection laws, which restricted slaughter and castration (Pillar Edicts V & VII), while ethical, also had an economic rationale. They protected vital agrarian capital—draft animals like bulls and oxen—ensuring agricultural productivity, which was the primary source of revenue for the *Kosha* (Fitzpatrick, 2008).

The Dhamma, therefore, promoted an economic ethic that, while couched in morality, ultimately served to stabilize and enhance the financial foundation of the Mauryan state.

### 3.5. Dhamma and the *Danda* (Coercion): The Ideological Disarmament

The *Danda*, the army and the power of punishment, was the ultimate guarantor of state power. However, overt and excessive reliance on coercion is expensive, provokes resistance, and is a sign of a weak state. Ashoka's Dhamma sought to reduce the need for overt *Danda*.

- **The "Conquest by Dhamma":** By proclaiming *Dhammavijaya* as the highest form of conquest, Ashoka was effectively declaring that ideological control was more effective and sustainable than military control (Dhammika, 1993). A populace that internalizes the Dhamma—which includes obedience to authority—policing itself. This is the most cost-effective form of governance (Tambiah, 1976).
- **Reform, Not Brutality, in Justice:** In Pillar Edict IV, Ashoka discusses his reforms in the judicial system. He announces a three-day reprieve for prisoners sentenced to death so they can prepare for the afterlife and make appeals. He also speaks of instilling *anukampa* (compassion) in his officers (Dhammika, 1993). While the death penalty remains, this projection of mercy serves to legitimize the judicial *Danda*. It presents the king not as a tyrant but as a just and compassionate ruler, making his ultimate power to punish more palatable and thus more effective.

- Internalizing Control: The ultimate success of the Dhamma project would be a society where the "rod of punishment" (*danda*) becomes largely redundant because the people have internalized the state's ideology. The Dhamma was meant to be the conscience of the citizen, making the external enforcer less necessary (Fitzpatrick, 2008).

### 3.6. Dhamma and the *Mitra* (The Ally): Foreign Policy as Moral Suasion

The Sanatana theory places great importance on allies. Ashoka extended the logic of his Dhamma to the realm of foreign policy.

- Dhamma as Diplomatic Tool: Rock Edict XIII mentions that Ashoka sent envoys of Dhamma to the Hellenistic kings—Antiochus II Theos of Syria, Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt, Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander of Epirus (Sircar, 1975). This is a remarkable instance of using a moral code as an instrument of foreign policy. It projected Ashoka's power and righteousness on an international stage, establishing his moral leadership and potentially creating a ring of friendly states impressed by his philosophy, thereby securing his frontiers (Thapar, 1997).
- Dhamma in Border Regions: The separate Kalinga Edicts and the edicts addressed to the forest tribes (Rock Edict XIII) show a targeted application of Dhamma. He warns the forest tribes that he, despite his repentance, still possesses power and urges them to reform (Dhammika, 1993). This is a clear use of Dhamma as a tool for frontier management, combining a moral appeal with a subtle threat, aiming to pacify potentially hostile border populations and turn them into friendly entities, thus securing the *Janapada* (Singh, 2008).

### 3.7. Dhamma and the *Durga* (The Fortified City)

While the edicts do not directly address urban planning or fortifications, the concept of *Durga* can be interpreted metaphorically. The Dhamma itself was the ideological fortification of the empire. Just as a physical *Durga* provided security and was a center of administration, the Dhamma was the ideological core that was meant to protect the empire from internal decay and rebellion. The propagation of Dhamma from the center (Pataliputra) to the peripheries through edicts carved at strategic locations (often near trade routes and urban centers) was the process of building an impregnable fortress of ideology across the empire (Fitzpatrick, 2008).

## 4. Critical Limitations and Counter-Narratives

A critical study must also acknowledge the limitations and potential failures of this project.

- The Gap between Ideology and Reality: The very need to repeatedly inculcate the same virtues across decades of edicts suggests that the Dhamma was not being universally or spontaneously adopted. The creation of the *Dhamma-Mahamatras* itself indicates that social harmony was not a natural state and had to be actively enforced (Thapar, 1997).
- Economic Contradictions: The Dhamma's emphasis on non-violence and protection of animals may have conflicted with the economic activities of hunter-gatherer tribes, pastoralists, and even farmers, potentially creating pockets of economic discontent (Singh, 2008).
- The Question of Succession and Decline: The rapid decline of the Mauryan Empire after Ashoka is a powerful argument against the long-term efficacy of his Dhamma as a political system. It appears that the ideology was too personally tied to Ashoka and failed to be institutionalized in a way that could survive a weaker successor. The Sanatana, after his death, began to atrophy without its unifying ideological force (Thapar, 1997).
- The Persistence of Traditional Power Structures: The Dhamma, while challenging certain Brahmanical rituals, did not fundamentally alter the varna (caste) system. Its call for

generosity to Brahmins shows a pragmatic accommodation with the existing social power structure, indicating the limits of its transformative ambition (Gokhale, 1966).

## 5. Conclusion

Interrogating Ashoka's Dhamma through the analytical prism of the Sanatana theory reveals a figure far more complex than the saintly monk-king of legend. Ashoka was a political visionary who recognized that an empire of such scale and diversity could not be held together by military force and bureaucratic diktat alone. It required a unifying ideology.

His Dhamma was that ideology—a sophisticated, comprehensive, and pragmatic tool of statecraft. It was designed to:

1. Legitimize the *Swami* through a new theology of righteous kingship.
2. Control the *Amatya* through a new class of moral supervisors and a code of conduct.
3. Pacify and harmonize the *Janapada* by promoting social virtues and religious tolerance.
4. Stabilize the *Kosha* by promoting an ethic of frugality and productive investment.
5. Supplement and humanize the *Danda* by encouraging internalized self-control.
6. Secure the *Mitra* through diplomatic moral suasion.

Ashoka's Dhamma was not a renunciation of power but its reconfiguration. It was an attempt to build a hegemonic order where the subjects would willingly consent to imperial rule because they believed in the moral righteousness of the emperor and his project (Tambiah, 1976). He sought to create an empire where power flowed not just from the fear of punishment, but from the consent of a populace that had embraced the state's ethical code as its own.

In the final analysis, Ashoka was both a moralist and a master politician. His edicts are not simply spiritual musings; they are the blueprint for an ideological state, a testament to the intricate and inseparable link between morality and power in the project of ancient empire-building. The Sanatana lens allows us to see the Mauryan emperor not as a pacifist anomaly in history, but as one of its most brilliant and ambitious practitioners of realpolitik, cloaked in the language of virtue.

## References

1. Dhammika, V. S. (1993). *The Edicts of King Ashoka*. Buddhist Publication Society.
2. Fitzpatrick, C. (2008). Ashoka's Dhamma and the Arthashastra: A Cross-Cultural Study in Political Theory. *Journal of Asian History*, \*42\*(1), 1–22.
3. Gokhale, B. G. (1966). *Ashoka Maurya*. Irvington Publishers.
4. Kangle, R. P. (1986). *The Kautilya Arthashastra* (Vol. 1-3). Motilal Banarsidass.
5. Sircar, D. C. (1975). *Inscriptions of Ashoka*. Publications Division, Government of India.
6. Singh, U. (2008). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Pearson Education.
7. Tambiah, S. J. (1976). *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background*. Cambridge University Press.
8. Thapar, R. (1997). *Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.
9. Thapar, R. (1987). *The Mauryas Revisited*. K.P. Bagchi & Company