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Historical Role of Asoka for Making Buddhism a world Religion

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Abstract

Whenever Buddhism is discussed as a global religion, the role of Emperor Asoka is obvious in our mind. His Dhamma policy is also behind Asoka's greatness in history. Even if his Dhamma is not purely Buddhist Dhamma, but it is surely influenced in deep from the Buddhist Dhamma. Similarly Asoka's role in making Buddhism as a global religion is due to his efforts for spread through various methods. The purpose of this research article is to confirm with the facts about how Ashoka played an important role in the spread of Buddhism. What are the other important personalities like Asoka in history, who can be compared with Asoka? It is also a purpose of this article to see that why Asok took so much interest in the spread of Buddhism.

Keywords: Kalinga war, spread of Buddhism, humanitarian value, Dhamma policy, rock edicts

Introduction

Buddhism due to its humanitarian value now accepted around the world today. It was first started in India and spread in Asia in ancient time and in modern time Europe, America and Australia.

So many kings, monks, lay followers contributed for its dissemination, but the one who had most important role to propagate Buddhism is the Emperor Asoka who opened the path for making this religion the largest in the world with teeming humanity of Asia embracing it in due course. But Asoka was not that much kind and soft hearted emperor. This believed to happen after the Kalinga war and his defeat which is now known as Odisha. According to Buddhist literary sources, in his youth Asoka was known to be a man of fierce temperament and called Canda Asoka (fierce Asoka).

The Mauryan emperor Asoka (265-238 BC) ruled for nearly four decades over most of South Asia. After his military defeat of the Kalingas in 260 BCE, he is said to have converted to Buddhism.

Kalinga War and Mind Change

His thirteenth rock edict explains that at the end of the eighth year of his reign, he invaded the country of Kalinga. In that invasion, many thousands of men were killed, several thousands were carried off into captivity and thousands died from the effect of the war. This tremendous loss of life and resources proved to be the turning point in the life of Asoka. He repented and decided not to undertake further military invasions. Instead began to think Dhammavijaya (religious conquest).

Asoka and Buddhism

Emperor Asoka was not the founder of the Buddhism. Neither he was monk or Prophet, but among those who propagated religions in the world, he was the greatest. The greatness lays in the fact that though a powerful emperor; he never tried for making Buddhism a state religion under pressure or force. Instead he decided most peaceful way as a missionary to enlighten people and kingdoms by precepts and practices.

He had sufficient respect and tolerance to all other religion and mass that follow them. In this way he was different from several kings who made any specific religion state religion and sometimes force people in the kingdom.

He was not religious fanatic, but a Buddhist and his respect for other religion in India were profound. Emperor Asoka was a missionary who paid great attention to introduce universal code of moral conduct which was beneficial for all human beings. He focused more on ethical value and principles than formal aspects of Buddhism. Asoka's most known contribution of his missionary efforts is spreading Buddhism outside India.

Two centuries before than the birth of Christ, his missionary monks introduced Buddhist philosophy and ethics into Western Asia and Greek territories. When Christianity came into existence, Buddhism was already there. Asoka was like a connecting link between the Buddhist and Christian ethics.

Asoka's Role in the Spread of Buddhism

From Asoka's rock edicts, II and XIII we get the names of several countries where messengers were dispatched by Asoka for moral conquest and for medical treatment. All these edicts throw light on Asoka's religious and social activities which were not confined to India, but had spread over India, Ceylon, Syria, Egypt, Macedonia, Epirus and Cyrene. According to Seneviratna, he, after third Buddhist council in Pataliputta, with the help of Moggaliputta Tissa, sent Buddhist missionaries all over the world – to Kashmir and Gandhara, to the Himalayas and the land of the Yonas, to Maharashtra and Suvarnabhumi – but most of all to Sri Lanka where he sent his own son along with four theras, Itthiya, Uttiya, Sambala and Bhaddasala.

In those days, in Burma and Ceylon, it seems that there was not any religion except primitive superstitious practices. With the efforts by Asoka's missionary work, those lands brought under Buddhist influence. Asoka sent his own son Mahindra to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) as Buddhist Bhikhu and later her daughter Sanghamitra too. Sanghamitra also stayed there to convert the people into Buddhism. As *encyclopedia of Buddhism* edited by Damien Keown and Charles S. Prebish mentions, "Asoka's son Mahinda and his daughter Sanghamitta both joined the *sangha* and are credited with establishing Buddhism in Sri Lanka after they converted King Tissa (c. 306 BC)."

Significance of His Work for Making Buddhism a World Religion

These are unusual examples of sacrifice a person and an emperor did for the spread of Buddhist teachings. We find no such kings in history with such missionary zeal and idea. For his missionary work he left not any efforts to make it success. Hinduism being a non-missionary religion, its remained confined to India with all its philosophies and spiritual values.

People of the other countries could not know about Hinduism and therefore could not adopt it. But Buddhism seems to be first missionary religion. The masses of people in other countries could not know of it and therefore could not accept it as their own. But, Buddhism was a missionary religion.

Asoka's attempt to spread the Buddhism not only opened the doors of the people of the counties a rich religion in philosophy and ethics, but also added a new form of culture and civilization. Only few centuries after Asoka, Buddhism became the religion of Tibet, China, Japan, Ceylon and almost entire South-East Asia.

These counties not only had impact from Buddhist spiritual

thought but also Indian art, philosophy and other aspects of culture of Hinduism which travelled with Buddhism. This is the reason Asoka placed in the front place in history for his missionary work to dedicate his life to civilize humanity beyond his kingdom. He not only dedicated his life for missionary work, but launched many philanthropic activities based on the spirit of Buddhism. Asoka although sometimes compared with Roman Emperor Constantine the Great who was a patron of Christianity for his missionary work. But there was a big difference between these two. Constantine supported the cause of Christianity when it was spreading out as an ambient force. Contrary to it, Asoka championed Buddhism when it was too small inside India and was limited to a sect, to make it a world religion. Constantine propagated Christianity more for political reasons, while Asoka disseminated Buddhism more for moral reasons. While the one was intolerant towards other faiths, Asoka was tolerant to all.

Asoka is also juxtaposed with Charlemagne, although Charlemagne made Christianity a state religion of his conquered territories for expansion of his royal power. Contrary, Asoka never tried to make Buddhism a state religion. He preached and promoted Buddhism, but did not impose it on others in his capacity as a king.

Perhaps more appropriately, we can compare Asoka, (as Western historians have also compared) to St. Paul, who pushed the cause of Christianity forward when it was considered to be in a religion with very small number. The universal message of Christ for humanity, which people could not understand in the beginning, resulted in crucifixion.

He was Paul who, despite facing many difficulties, carried the meaning of Christianity in front of the people. Because of him, Christianity was found to be a place in the hearts of countless people and was considered as a major religion.

Similarly, it was Asoka who carried Buddhism among millions of people and it now it is considered in a world religion. May be the Asoka was after seeing killings in Kalinga war; he opted for cultural impact on kingdoms than territorial victories. His reign came to be seen as the conceptual model for a Universal Monarch, the cakkavatti, who conquers and rules by the peaceful force of the Dhamma.

That is why, he has been mentioned by historians as "the greatest of kings" and that "not because of the physical extent of his empire, extensive as it was, but because of his character as a man, the ideals for which he stood and the principles by which he governed."

Conclusion

The reasons he succeeded in his mission to make Buddhism a world religion is universal compassion to all human beings not limited to his kingdom, but beyond what he motivated from Buddhism, apparently can be found in his XV Rock Edicts. It may be relevant to mention few lines here to conclude this paper.

In Rock Edict XV he says: "All men are my children. Just as, in regard to my own children, I desire that they may be provided by me with all kinds of welfare and happiness in this world and in the next, the same I desire in respect of all men."

In same Rock Edicts he says: "I may free myself from the debt I owe to the people inhabiting the lands beyond the borders of my dominions. This is my will as well as my

unshakable resolution and vow. You should (Mahamatras) inspire the people of the bordering lands with confidence in me, so that they might realize that the king is to them even as their father, that he sympathizes with them even as he sympathizes with his own self and that they are to the king even as his own children.”

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