

THE DHARMA OF ASHOKA AND THE GITA

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Many scholars have hailed Ashoka as the earliest monarch in the world to emphasise the importance of *satya* (truth) and non-violence (ahimsa) and eschew war as a means to settling national and international disputes. The greatness of Ashoka has been attributed to his exclusively Buddhist leanings, but this theory has been challenged. The advocates of the Jaina theory have attempted to show that the entire Maurya dynasty followed Jainism and that Ashoka followed the religion of his predecessors as he himself asserts in his inscriptions¹. Non-violence is no doubt more important in Jainism than in Buddhism. But truth and non-violence are ethical principles of remote antiquity in *Bharata Dharma*. Therefore some scholars have argued that Ashoka was neither a Buddhist nor a Jaina but a follower of *Sanatana Dharma* or "Porana Pakiti" as he himself says². His regard for all sects is more in conformity with the tenets of the Brahmanical religion than Buddhism or Jainism, which at this period were small monastic sects, intolerant towards *tirthikas pasandas* and heretics. The Buddhist accounts of the conversion of Ashoka by Upagupta or Tissa or Nigrodha etc., are flatly contradicted by Ashoka's own statement that it was the Kalinga war that produced a moral revolution in him. Nowhere in the Jaina or Buddhist texts do we find mention of the Kalinga war, nor does Ashoka acknowledge anywhere that his missionary effort was inspired by Moggaliputta Tissa. Ashoka claimed great success throughout Jambu Dvipa but there is little evidence that Greece, Macedon, Cyrene, Corinth, Epirus, Syria, etc. were all converted to the particular dogmas of Thera vada Buddhism, which Ashoka is said to have endorsed after the refutation of the eighteen heretical sects in the Pataliputra council.

The Mahabharata (and with it the Gita) forms the main source of Dharma and apart from the interpolations, it must substantially have been compiled at least before c. 500 B.C.³ Holtzmann, Lassen, Schroeder, Hopkins, Wintemitz, Meyer and others who have tried to analyse the Mahabharata saw only successive reactions and failed to account for the fundamental plan underlying the whole work, Prof. Pisani remarks : "Who has told these Western critics that the didactic parts have been added to the epic ones?" The Gita in its place is an indissoluble part of the poem according to Sylvain Levi. According to Levi, the Gita is the ideal centre - the poet of the Gita is that of the Mahabharata, with religious and practical aims.⁴ Even when the Bhrguization of the original text took place in the first and second centuries A.D. as evident from the mention of Roma in the Sabha Parva, Kaserumant (Caesars, according to Weber and Levi), Dinara etc. the spirit of the ancient text was preserved in its entirety as sacrosanct and the Mahabharata verses in Baudhayana, Vasistha, Manu, Vishnu, Yajnavalkya, Narada and other smrtis, the Maha Bhashya, Apastamba and other Dharma Sutras show that the epic formed the primary source for Dharma.

It should therefore be acknowledged that the Mahabharata exercised universal influence throughout the country for nearly a millennium from the sixth century B.C. to the Gupta age and Ashoka shows close acquaintance with the message of the Mahabharata and the Gita. To assert that the age gave prominence only to the Prakrits and that the orthodox reaction after the

Mauryas was responsible for the revival of Sanskrit is to ignore the existence of such works as the Artha Shastra and the Maha Bhashya and attach undue importance to the Jaina and Buddhist works. There was no period of ancient Indian history when we can safely assert that Sanskrit was either a dead language or that its all-pervading influence was in abeyance. The Vedic religion certainly did not cease to exist merely because Jaina and Buddhist faiths spread in some parts of India. All India was not converted to Buddhism or Jainism and neither was Buddhism the state religion under Ashoka.

The *Raja Dharma* section of the Mahabharata presents the political and ethical ideals of several ancient schools and Kautilya's Artha Shastra represents the particular viewpoint of its author on matters dealt with in the *Raja Dharma*. There is absolutely no basis for the contention of some who have invoked the name of Broeler, that Kautilya was probably indebted to the Greek conceptions of the city-state, imperialism, administrative machinery or army organisation. Ashoka, however, seems to have preferred the older ideals of polity and ethics of the Mahabharata and the Gita, instead of adhering to the Kautilyan injunctions. The Artha Shastra envisaged a different situation when Shāstra and shastra as well as territorial sovereignty had come under the control of an irresponsible executive represented by the Nanda imperialism. After the consolidation of the empire and more than half a century of ordered administration, Ashoka seems to have assured himself that the higher ideals embodied in the Mahabharata should be given a fair trial. The epic was not a mere textbook of Dharma but a practical guide. Bhishma says that mere textbook knowledge of Dharma is of little use but that knowledge should be reinforced by Prajna and that the common people should be definitely ordered by the king to follow the precepts where there is doubt regarding one's duty⁵. But the Dharma should be comprehensive and not of one school only.

⁵ नैतत् श्रुत्वागमादेव तव धर्मानुशासनम् ।

प्रजासभशिहारोयं कविभिस्संम्भूतं मधु ॥

बाह्याः प्रतिविधातव्या प्रजाराजा ततस्ततः ।

बहुशास्त्रेण धर्मेण यत्रेषा संप्रसिध्यते (*Apaddharma*. Ch. 140 3-4. Cf. *Prajna Vada*. (Gita, I, II).

Ashoka seems to have attempted a synthesis of Raja Dharma and Apaddharma with the Moksha Dharma as depicted in the Shanti Parva. His quest for Shanti for his own self as well as for all living beings was guided not by any sectarian creed but by the eternal principles of *Sanatana Dharma*. The attempts of some scholars, who by a misinterpretation of the words of Ashoka have tried to prove that Ashoka was inimical to the caste system to the superior claims of the Brahmanas, the Vedic ceremonies, the older gods etc, have proved futile, in the face of the clear evidence of his own inscriptions. He is never tired of enjoying reverence and gifts to Brahmanas⁶ as to all others worthy of respect. He himself displayed the images of the gods, etc.⁷ He believed in Svarga⁸, Karma, Dharma, rebirth and retribution - the cardinal tenets of Vedic culture. He accepted the Dharma Shastra classification of Karmas as *nitya naimittika*, *kamya* and *nishiddha*. The modified prohibition of animal slaughter was not directed against Vedic sacrifices, which must have been few and far between even as in the previous and subsequent ages. The controversy

regarding animal slaughter in sacrifices had existed long before him⁹ and continued long after him. The attempt to trace any Buddhist or Jaina influence in this prohibition is due to ignorance of the literature on this topic.

In his reaction to war and its horrors, Ashoka is represented as a contrast to the Gita ideal which enjoins *Dharma Yuddha* for the Kshatriyas. When Arjuna was confronted with the same problem, his first reaction seems to have been like that of Ashoka after the Kalinga war. *Shoka* and *Moha* clouded the judgment of Arjuna¹⁰.

¹⁰प्राणिनां शोकमोहादिसंसारनीजभूवदोषोदूभवकारणप्रदर्शनार्थत्वेन व्याख्येयीयो ग्रंथः.....

शोकमोहाभ्य ह्यभिभूतविवेकविज्ञानः स्वत एव क्षात्रधर्मयुद्धे प्रवृत्तोपि तस्माद् युद्धादुपराम

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But Ashoka regrets Asura Vijaya motivated by personal glory. In Asura Vijaya there is wanton destruction of old men, children and non-combatants, contrary to the rule of righteous war¹¹.

¹¹वृद्धाः बालाः न हंतव्याः न च स्त्री नैव पृष्ठतः

तृणपूर्णमुखश्चैव तवास्मीति च यो वदेत्

Ashoka says that slaughter, death and carrying of the captives was only one of the causes for his regret. A stronger reason for his regret was the harm done to Brahmanas and Shramanas and others whose duty was to preach Dharma¹². This was the greater violence; Ashoka was not against all violence as he warns the forest peoples to turn from evil ways that they be not chastised.

अपि च अटवी देवानां प्रियस्य विजिते भोति त अपि

अनुनेति अपि निजपेति अनुतापेपि च प्रभावे । R. E. XIII

Ashoka did not abolish capital punishment. *Danda* was not entirely given up in accordance with the maxim:

धर्माद्धि युद्धात् श्रेयोन्यत् क्षत्रियस्य न विध्यते । (Gita I 31 cd)

Kautilya enjoins punishment according to the degree of the crime, neither *mridu* nor *Tikshna* but *yatharha*. This does not mean the equality of law according to a preconceived theory of the equal castes. There is therefore no basis for the assumption that Ashoka acted according to the principle that *Rajadanda* upholds Dharma.¹³

चतुर्वर्णाश्रमस्यायं लोकस्याचाररक्षणात् ।

नश्यतं सर्वधर्मानां राजधर्मप्रवर्तकः ॥

दंडो हि केवलो लोकं परं चेमं च रक्षति ।

राजा पुत्रे च शत्रौ च यथा दोषं समंधृतः ॥

As Bhishma says, kingship involves cruelty but weakness and vacillation in the ruler will lead to greater harm.

न च नित्यानृसंसेन शक्यं राज्यमुपासितुम् ।
दानशीलो भवेद् राजा यज्ञशलिश्च भारत ॥
उपवासतपःशीलः प्रजानां पालने रतः ।
सर्वश्चैव प्रजा नित्यं राजा धर्मेण पालयन् ॥
उत्थानेन प्रदानेन पूजयेच्चपि धार्मिकान् ।
राजा हि पूजितो धर्मः ततः सर्वत्र पूज्यते ॥
यध्यदाचरते राजा तत् प्रजानां स्म रोचते ।
नित्यमुद्यतदंडश्च भवेन्मृत्युखिरिषु ।
निहन्यात् सर्वतो दस्यून् न राज्ञो दस्युषु क्षमा ॥

The analysis of Ashoka's precepts shows that neither in his dogmas nor in the general ethical principles was there anything distinctively Buddhist or Jaina. Ashoka nowhere mentions the Four Aryan Truths, nor *Pratitya Samutpada*, nor the eight-fold path, cardinal to Buddhism. The advocates of the Jaina theory are content to assume that Ashoka was at first a Jaina but later preached only *Samayana Dharma*. The *Bhabru* edict addressed to the Buddhist Samgha, Ashoka's visits to Buddhist holy places, the grants to *Ajivikas* indicate merely that he was a reverent student of these systems and cherished their welfare, in accordance with the ancient Brahmanical ideal of toleration and understanding of all religions. He followed the Gita precepts¹⁵

"न बुद्धिभेदं जनयेदज्ञानां कर्मसगिनाम्"

He asks all people to follow his example and show energy. 'Let small and great exert themselves.'¹⁶ ". . . The fruit is not to be attained by the great man only, because even the small man who chooses to exert himself may win great happiness in heaven." This conforms to the Gita injunction:

यध्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः ।
स यत् प्रमाणां कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥ (3.21)

Obedience to elders and parents, respect for life, truth and similar ethical precepts are called by Ashoka Dharma *gunas* and *Purana Prakati*, (ancient natural instinct or Sanatana Dharma). Ashoka did not emphasise the ultimate Gita ideal of *Nishkama Karma* which is only possible for a few highly disciplined minds but a lower every-day morality for the masses, with promises of happiness in Svarga and threats of the consequences of sin. The Gita says: "Even as those ignorant people become engrossed in karmas the wise also perform karmas with the most important difference - that the latter are unattached to the fruit and do their duty as a disinterested service to humanity (*loka samgraha*.)"¹⁷. *Porana Pakiti* therefore also means duties done under the influence of *Prakriti* which is *anadi* and has the three *gunas*.

The later Brahmanas and Upanishads had asserted the impermanence of all karmas ययेह कर्मचितो लोकः क्षीयते एवं एवामुत्र पुण्यचितो लोकः क्षीयते । Ch. Up. I. The Gita also echoes the same idea. (क्षीणपुण्ये मर्त्यलोकं विशन्ति) The *Karma Kanda* reasserted the permanence of happiness in heaven अपोम सोमं अमृता अभूम and postulated *apurva*. The Veda enjoins *kriya* (आम्नायस्य क्रियार्थतत्त्वात् 1) or *bhavana*¹⁸ which has three components-the goal or fruit (*sadhya*), the means (*sadhana*) and duty (*itikartavyata*). Salvation is *sadhya* and not *siddha* according to this view. Accordingly Ashoka says "a good deed is a difficult thingsin is an easy thing."(R.E.V.) "Men of all sects desire mastery over the senses and purity of mind. Man, however, is various in his wishes, and various in his likings." This is the Upanisad and Gita teaching about the difficulty of controlling the senses and how our thoughts and desires shape our destiny and personality¹⁹. Not only the thoughts at the moment of death but throughout life determine the man's future. Steadfastness²⁰ and devotion are therefore insisted on by Ashoka. He says: "This is the ceremony to be performed until the purpose thereof is fulfilled; for those ceremonies that are another than these - they are all of doubtful effect. It may achieve that purpose or it may not. And it is only for this world. But this ceremonial of Dharma is not of time. Even if one does not achieve the object in this world, in the world beyond is produced endless merit. But if one achieves that purpose in this world the gain of both results from it - that object in this world and endless merit in the other world." (R.E. IX).

The Gita characterises the regular performance of the three Dharma skandhas, *yajna*, *dana* and *tapas*²¹ as *sat* and these *nitya karmas* should be done without egotism and will lead to purification (*visuddhikarani-shamkara*). *Sat* is explained in 17-26 as सद् भावे साधुभावे च सदित्येतत् प्रयुज्यते । प्रशस्ते कर्मणि तथा सच्छन्दः पार्थ युज्यते ॥ Therefore Ashoka is never tired of asserting the value of true *yajna*, *adhyayana* and *dana*. He enjoins the *antevasin* to observe Brahmacharya in gurukula. (हेमेव अंतेवासिना आचरिये अपचितिवर्ये The Brhadaranyaka Upanishad VI. 22) also says:

यजेन दानेन तपसानाशकेनैतमेव विदित्वा मुनिर्भवति ।

एतमेव प्रव्राजिनो लोकमिच्छंतः प्रव्रजन्ति ।

Ashoka in accordance with the Vedic maxim that we owe a debt to living beings says: "Work I must for the welfare of allAnd for what do I toil? For no other end than this that I may discharge my debt to animate beings." (R. E. VI)

ऋणानि त्रीण्यपाकृत्य मनो मोक्षे निवेशयेत् ।

जयमानो ह वै ब्राह्मणः त्रिभिरुऋणवान् जायते ॥

This threefold debt is discharged by sacrifice, study and charity. Regarding *Dana*, Ashoka while emphasising the great merit of ordinary gifts, gives greater importance to *Dharma dana* or *sattvika dana* as described in the Gita.

दातव्यमिति यद्दानं दीयतेनुपकारिणे ।
देशे काले च पात्रे च तद् दानं सात्त्विकं स्मृतम् ॥ 17.20

The gift of a knowledge of Dharma is the best.

Similarly when Ashoka enjoins control of the tongue (*vacha gupti*), not wounding the feelings of others, honour to all Brahmanas, Shramanas and elders, mastery over the senses, purity of mind, gratitude, steadfastness, study of sacred texts, etc., he is echoing the words of the Gita regarding *sattvika tapas*.

देवद्विजगुरुप्राज्ञपूजनं शौचमार्जवम् ।
ब्रह्मचर्यमहिंसा च शारीरं तप उच्यते ॥
अनुद्वेगकरं वाक्यं सत्यं प्रियहितं च यत् ।
स्वाध्यायाभ्यसनं चैव वान्ग्मयं तप उच्यते ॥
मनः प्रसादः सौम्यत्वं मौनमात्मविनिग्रहः ।
भावसंशुद्धिरित्येत् तपो मानसमुच्यते ॥
श्रद्धया परया तप्तं तपस्त्रिविधं नरैः ।
अफलाकांक्षिभिर्युक्तैः सात्त्विकं परिचक्षते । (Gita 17. 14, 17)

Finally it cannot be too strongly emphasised that universal compassion and *maitri*, though adopted in later Buddhism is metaphysically and logically inconsistent with a faith which denies the existence of Atma and asserts *shunyatva*, *kshanikatva* and *niralmbana*. Universal compassion can be possible only on the basis of *sarvatmaikatva* of the Vedanta. Ashoka was motivated by an ethics and metaphysics different from that of the Buddhists who denied the soul or of the Jainas who were dualists. He tried to cultivate the *samatva* of the *sthita prajna*.

सुहृन्मित्रार्युदासीनो मध्यस्थेष्वबंधुषु ।
साधुष्वपि च पापेषु समबुद्धिर्विशिष्यते ।
सर्वभूतस्थमात्मानं सर्वभूतानि चात्मनि ।
ईक्षते योगयुक्तात्मा सर्वतः समदर्शनः ॥

References:

1. Jaina Antiquary, Vol V.
2. Brahmagiri Edict. p ā s a n d a s
3. P. V. Kane; *Mahabharata verses in Dharma Sutras, etc. F. W. Thomas Vol.*
4. Pisani: *Rise of the Mahabharata, F. W. Thomas Vol R õ m ã*
5. नैतत् श्रुत्वागमादेव तव धर्मानुशासनम् ।
प्रज्ञासभशिहारोयं कविभिस्सम्भूतं मधु ॥

बाह्याः प्रतिविधातव्या प्रजाराजा ततस्ततः ।

बहुशास्वेन धर्मेण यत्रेषा संप्रसिध्यते (Apaddharma. Ch. 140 3-4. Cf. Prajna Vada. (Gita, I, II).

6. Brahmagiri 2, R.E. III, IV etc. liberality to Brahmanas and Shramanas; proper respect for Brahmanas and Shramanas, Cf. Mahabharata, Shanti: Ch, 226.
7. R.E. IV.
8. Brahmagiri R.E. VIII, XIII etc. prajñā
9. Cf. Mahabharata, Bhavishyapurana, etc. Cf. Moksha Dharma Ch. 253 ff. Tuladhara Jajali Samvada and Ch 264.
10. प्राणिनां शोकमोहादिसंसारनीजभूदोषोद्भवकारणप्रदर्शनार्थत्वेन व्याख्येयीयो ग्रंथः.....

शोकमोहाभ्य ह्यभिभूतविवेकविज्ञानः स्वत एव क्षात्रधर्मयुद्धे प्रवृत्तोपि तस्माद् युद्धादुपराम

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11. Raja Dharma, Ch 99. 47. Shukraniti 4. 7. 358.
12. R. E. XIII (Shabazgarhi), Vasati Bramana vashramana va aneva pasanda grahatha vayasuvihita esha agrabhutishu, etc. Compare Raja Dharma, Ch. 97 – 97 on Dharma Vijaya.
13. Artha Shastra III, 1. m r d u T ĩ k s n a y a t h ā r t h a
14. Raja Dharma Parva, Ch. 76, st. 18 cd; 2 – 51 compare Manu VII, 105. A. S. P. 29; 121 नित्यमुध्यतदंडः
स्यान्नित्यं विवृतपौरुषः । Pratitya Samutpada
15. Gita, 3. 26.
16. Brahmagiri M.R.E. Iyam phalena hiyam sakhye mahaptaveva papetave. Kamam sakhe kodake na hi...Pakaya banana vipule svage sakya aradetave.
17. Gita, 3, 25, 27

सक्ताः कर्मण्यविद्वांसो यथा कुर्वन्ति भारत ।

कुर्याद् विद्वांस्तथासक्तश्चिकीर्षुर्लोकसंग्रहम् ॥

प्रकृतेः त्रियमाण्यानि गुणः कर्माणी सर्वेशः ।

अहंकारविमूडात्मा कर्ताहमिति मन्यते ॥

18. साध्यसाधनेतिकर्तव्यताविशिष्टभावनाप्रतिपादकत्वम् ।
19. Gita 8, 5f, 14, 14f. अतः खलु कर्तुपयः पुरुषः यथा कर्तुरस्मिंल्लोके भवति तथेतः प्रेत्य भवति । (Ch. Up. 8, 2, 10). Cf. Br. Up. IV. 4. 5ff.
20. Gita, 17.3 श्रद्धमयोयं पुरुषो यो यच्छुद्धः स एव सः ।
21. Gita, 17, 11, 17, 20, 27.

(यज्ञे तपसि दाने च स्थितिः सदिति चोच्यते ।

कर्म चैव तदर्थीय सदित्येवमभिधीयते ॥)

यज्ञदानतपः कर्म न त्यज्यं कार्यमेव तत् ।

यज्ञो दानं तपश्चैव पावनानि मनीषिणाम् ॥

Compare Ch. Up II, 23. 1

त्रयो धमेस्कंवा । यज्ञोध्यपनं दानभिति प्रथमस्तप एव द्वितियो ब्रह्मचार्याचार्यकुलवासी तृतीयोत्यंतमात्मानं आचार्यकुलेवसादयन् । सर्व एते पुण्यश्लोका भवंति । ब्रह्मसंस्थोमृतत्वमेति ।