

Ashoka Inscription (The Edicts of Ashoka) [NCERT Notes - Ancient Indian History Notes For UPSC]

The great Emperor Ashoka, the third monarch of the Maurya dynasty converted to Buddhism after witnessing the horrific effects of war in Kalinga. He became a champion and patron of Buddhism and strove to spread Dhamma throughout his empire and beyond. He erected pillars and edicts all over the subcontinent and even in modern-day Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan to spread the Buddha's word.

Ashokan Inscriptions (Rock Edicts)

James Prinsep, a British antiquary and colonial administrator was the first person to decipher Ashoka's edicts. **These Ashoka's inscriptions are the first tangible evidence of Buddhism.**

They were kept in public places and along trade routes so that the maximum number of people would read them. More than religious discourses, they talk about the moral duties of the people, how to conduct life, Ashoka's desire to be a good and benevolent ruler, and Ashoka's work towards this end.

There are 33 inscriptions in total and primarily classified into the following:

1. Major rock edicts
 2. Minor rock edicts
 3. Separate rock edicts
 4. Major pillar edicts
 5. Minor pillar edicts
- In the earlier half of his reign, the edicts were inscribed on conveniently located rock surfaces and were distributed in the areas of public settlement, where people could easily read them and are referred to as major and minor rock edicts.
 - In the later part of his reign, the inscriptions were on well-polished monolithic pillars (from the sites of Chunar, near Varanasi), each edict surmounted with a finely sculpted animal capital involving great technological expertise in cutting and engraving and were mainly confined to the Ganges plain.
 - The inscriptions were composed in the Prakrit language (in Magadhi, the dialect of Prakrit in Magadha) and written in Brahmi script throughout the greater part of the empire. But in the north-western part, they appear in Kharosthi script and in Kandahar in Afghanistan, they were written in Aramaic, in Greek script and Greek language.
 - Most of the inscriptions are about dhamma (Prakrit form of dharma, literally means the universal law or righteousness or social and religious order) and it was inspired by the Buddhist Upasaka Dhamma (i.e., the Buddhist teaching for the laity). Ashoka's dhamma emphasised non-violence, mutual respect and understanding between people of different sects and beliefs. It included the state's concern for the welfare of its people. The basic attributes of dhamma included compassion, charity, truthfulness, purity and gentleness. He asked the people to extend respect, consideration, compassion and tolerance towards slaves and servants, obedience to parents, generosity towards friends and relatives, regard and donations to Brahmanas and Shramanas, a concern for all living beings and to abstain oneself from destroying life.

Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts

Major Rock Edicts: There are 14 major rock edicts:

Edict	Ashoka Inscription Details
Major Rock Edict I	Prohibition of animal sacrifice, especially during festive seasons.
Major Rock Edict II	Medical treatment of humans and animals, planting of fruits, medicinal herbs and the digging of wells. Mentions the Pandyas, Satyapuras and Keralaputras of South India.
Major Rock Edict III	Generosity to Brahmins. About Yuktas, Pradeshikas and Rajukas who would go every five years to different parts of his empire to spread Dhamma.
Major Rock Edict IV	Dhammadhosh (sound of Dhamma/righteousness) over Bherighosha (sound of war). The King Ashoka attached greatest value to his duty.
Major Rock Edict V	About Dhammamahamatras. Talks about treating slaves right. A special cadre of officials, Dhamma Gosha were appointed and entrusted with the duty of spreading Dhamma within the kingdom.
Major Rock Edict VI	King's desire to know about his people's conditions. About welfare measures.
Major Rock Edict VII	Tolerance towards religions among all sects and welfare measures for the public in his as well as his neighbouring kingdoms.
Major Rock Edict VIII	Ashoka's first visit to Bodh Gaya and the Bodhi tree (his first Dhamma Yatra). Gave importance to Dhamma tours.
Major Rock Edict IX	Condemns popular ceremonies. Stresses on moral conduct.
Major Rock Edict X	Disapproves of the individual's desire for fame and glory and stresses on Dhamma.
Major Rock Edict XI	Dhamma is the best policy to follow, which includes respect for elders and concern for slaves and servants.
Major Rock Edict XII	It mentions Mahamattas in charge of women's welfare, Ithijika Mahamatta and tolerance towards the dhamma of others.

Major Rock Edict XIII	<p>Mentions victory over Kalinga. Mentions Ashoka's Dhamma victory over Greek Kings Antiochus of Syria (Amitiyoko), Ptolemy of Egypt (Turamaye), Magas of Cyrene (Maka), Antigonus of Macedon (Amtikini), Alexander of Epirus (Alikasudaro). Also mentions Pandyas, Cholas, etc.</p> <p>The thirteenth rock edict which was issued at the end of the Kalinga war gives a vivid picture of the change of Ashoka from an aggressive and violent warrior to a great lover and preacher of peace. The direct and immediate effect of the Kalinga war was the conversion of Ashoka to Buddhism.</p>
Major Rock Edict XIV	<p>Purpose of rock edicts.</p>

Minor Rock Edicts

- Minor rock edicts are found on 15 rocks across the country and in Afghanistan also.
- Ashoka uses his name only in four of these places namely:
 1. Maski,
 2. Brahmagiri (Karnataka),
 3. Gujara (MP) and
 4. Nettur (AP).

Pillar Edicts

- There are seven pillar edicts.
- Two types of stones are used: spotted white sandstone (from Mathura) and buff coloured sandstone and quartzite (from Amaravati). Generally, they are made of sandstone quarried from Chunar. They have almost similar form and dimensions.
- All the pillars are monoliths (carved out of stone) and the surface is well polished.
- They have been found from different places like Kandahar (Afghanistan), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Pakistan), Delhi, Vaishali and Champaran (Bihar), Sarnath and Allahabad (Uttar Pradesh), Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh), and Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh).
- Fragments of the same edict are found in different places.
- Many pillars are as high as 50 feet and weigh as much as 50 tons.
- They are devoid of bases and the cylindrical shaft tapers slightly upwards to a height of 12-14 m. A cylindrical bolt joins the top of the shaft to the capital, and have a bell capital (a stone carved in the shape of an inverted lotus).
- There is a platform (abacus) on the top of the bell capital which supports the crowned animal.
- The pillars depict animals such as elephants and lions and wheels and lotuses which are all significant symbols in Buddhism.
- The majestic pillar edicts have been found at Topra, Rampurva, Nigali Sagar, Lauriya-Araraj, Lauriya Nandangarh, Sarnath and Meerut. Feroz Shah Tughlaq shifted pillars, one from Topra and the other from Meerut, to Delhi.

The following table gives the Pillar Edict number and what it talks about:

Edict	Ashoka Inscription Details
Pillar Edict I	Ashoka's principle of protecting his people.
Pillar Edict II	Defines Dhamma as minimum of sins, many virtues, compassion, liberty, truthfulness and purity.
Pillar Edict III	Avoiding practices of cruelty, sin, harshness, pride and anger among his subjects.
Pillar Edict IV	Responsibilities of the Rajukas.
Pillar Edict V	List of animals and birds that should not be killed on certain days. Another list mentions animals that should never be killed. Describes release of 25 prisoners. This pillar edict is also known as Delhi-Topra Pillar Edict .
Pillar Edict VI	Dhamma policy of the State (welfare of the people).
Pillar Edict VII	Ashoka's work for fulfilling Dhamma. Tolerance for all sects. Also, about Dhamma Mahamattas.

Other relevant inscriptions and important edicts:

Edict/ Inscription	Remarks
Allahabad - Kosam/Queens Edict/Kausambi or Schism Edict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ashoka asks the members of the Sangha to refrain from causing division in the ranks. Samudragupta's inscription is on this edict itself. Jahangir shifted it to the fort at Allahabad.
Kandahar Inscription	It is a famous bilingual edict in Greek and Aramaic.
Kalinga Edicts (Bhauri and Jaugada)	Mentions 'All men are my children.'
Sannati Inscription (Karnataka)	Site of all 14 major rock edicts as well as two separate Kalinga edicts.
Rummindei Inscription (Nepal)	It mentions that the village of Lumbini (birthplace of the Buddha) be exempted from bali and was to pay only one-eighth of the bhaga.
Girnar Rock Inscription of	Mentions the Sudarshan lake constructed by Pushyagupta, a rashtriya (means provincial governor) of Saurashtra during Chandragupta

Rudradaman (Kathiawar)	Maurya's reign.
Minor Rock Edict 1	Indicates that Ashoka turned towards Buddhism gradually, after 2.5 years in power.
Minor Rock Edict 3	Ashoka greets Sangha, professes his deep faith in the Buddha, dhamma, and Sangha, also recommends six Buddhist texts for monks, nuns and general laity.
Inscriptions at Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra.	Written in Kharosthi script.

Ashoka's Inscription Excerpt

Major Rock Edict VI

Beloved of the Gods speaks thus: Twelve years after my coronation I started to have Dhamma edicts written for the welfare and happiness of the people, and so that not transgressing them they might grow in the Dhamma. Thinking: "How can the welfare and happiness of the people be secured?" I give my attention to my relatives, to those dwelling far, so I can lead them to happiness and then I act accordingly. I do the same for all groups. I have honoured all religions with various honours. But I consider it best to meet with people personally.