



# Buddhism and Political Rule Rethinking on Ashoka's Attempt to Reshape India

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**Abstract.** In the 3rd century BC, facing the problems of caste system caused by Brahmanism, emperor Ashoka who was the most famous ruler of ancient India tried to use Buddhism and tolerance to reshape Indian society. However, his attempt failed because of fragile politics and immature agricultural economic, thus making India lost the possibility of forming a more united community. Why Ashoka chose Buddhism? How the attempt went wrong? That's what will be discussed and solved in detail in this paper. This paper first introduces the caste system in India, then analyzes the rise of Buddhism and Peacock Empire, and finally discusses the legal reform implemented by Ashoka. To accomplish the task, this paper used methods including text description and analysis. This paper holds that strong political power not tolerance as well as Buddhism was the only way to solve problems of caste system in ancient India, which was still appropriate in modern India. This paper will be beneficial to providing a new analytical case for the Ancient Indian Studies.

**Keywords:** Caste system · Buddhism · Peacock Empire · Ashoka · disassembly

## 1 Introduction

In the 1837 AC, Prinsep successfully interpreted the inscription written by the earliest known Indian character "Brahmi", which referred to a king name "Devanamapiya Piyadassi" (God's beloved king). Later, it was found in the Buddhist chronicle of Ceylon that the name was used to address a king of Peacock Dynasty. In an inscription in 1915, it was addressed that the author claimed to be "King Asoka", which determined the identity of the mysterious king [1]. After that, the research of Peacock Empire and Asoka rose up. At the respect of monograph, "The Advanced History of India" written by Ma Zongda and others discussed the origin and development of the caste system [2]. Ta Paer's "Ancient Civilization of India" analyzed Ashoka's policy and the decline Peacock Dynasty [1]. Cui Lianzhong's "From Buddha to Ashoka" demonstrated the relationship between Buddha to Ashoka and analysed how Ashoka used Buddhism to release the contraction of his empire [3]. His another famous book "The Founder of Buddhism: Life and Thought" illustrated the main religious doctrine of Buddhism and it's effect for Indian society [4]. Guo Liangyun's "Budda and Original Thought of Buddhism" completely presented the complex theory of Buddhism [5], thus offering a way to dig its fundamental meaning. The primary meaning of Buddhism is useful for us to research

the effect of Buddhism. Moving on to general history book, "A Global History: From Prehistory to The 21st Century" basically shew the picture of Ashoka and his policy [6]. However, in this book, the author haven't realized the problem of the agriculture of Peacock Empire. "A World History" entirely illustrated the origin, development and collapse of Peacock Empire whereas the original edit was more successful [7, 8]. "The History of Global Civilization" and "Ancient Global History" introduced the identification of Peacock Empire [9, 10], which was beneficial to this research.

Although all of the books above have discussed Buddha and Peacock Empire, none of them clearly describe the relationship between Buddhism and Ashoka as well as why Ashoka wasted all the previous effort. This paper mainly discusses how Ashoka used Buddhism and the reasons for its failure, and tries to summarize the significance and Enlightenment of India's construction. In this paper, the main approaches are text analysis. Firstly, a brief background is described to clearly show the situation of Ashoka's country. After that, this paper discusses the role of Buddhism in the peacock Empire and the reasons for its ultimate failure. In addition, this paper also attempts to summarize the significance of Ashoka's reform.

## 2 Caste System

The prototype of caste system is "Varna", that is, many social groups with different levels. When Aryans came in to the Indus valley around 1500 BC, they faced a rich civilization with large urban centers and huge population. Although Aryans gradually conquered them with horse and metal weapons, expanding to Ganges River Basin around 1000 BC, they could not completely destroy the original culture. As Aryans learned to make iron and transformed from nomadism to agriculture, they gradually turned to settled life. During this process, they integrated with local people and absorbed their culture by marriage and commercial relationship. At the same time, sense of racial superiority and fear of local people in black skin made them deliberately distinguish the two by conducting theories and laws, which announced that local people were humble and couldn't enjoy respect and right. It got in to local society step by step and gradually formed into caste system.

In Vedic era, with the development and mature of slavery and social differentiation, hierarchy difference was little by little formed in the form of system. The particularity of caste system was reflected in four aspects. The first was professional uniqueness. A caste has certain occupational restrictions. For example, bankers and businessmen often belonged to Vaisya. The second was strict principles of marriage. Basically, people in different hierarchy married internally. Apart from that, restrictions on the purity of food, etiquette and contact were also strict. One story vividly demonstrated this situation. Although its reality was doubtful.

Once upon a time, when Naples was governed by Martapura, Bodhisattva was born in Zhanchalovarna. When he was growing up, he once took a trip for some reason, with meals and a basket of food with him. At this time there lived a young Brahman named Kadagama in Naples. He was born in an upper Brahman family of north India. He also set out on his journey, but took neither a meal nor a food basket with him. Two men met on a military road. The young Brahman asked the Bodhisattva, "Which Varna do

you come from?" "I am Zhanchalovarna," he replied to young Brahman and asked him, "So Which Varna do you belong to?" "I come from a Brahman family in the north," the young man replied. "Ok, let's go together." With those words they moved on. When it was time for breakfast, the Bodhisattva sat down at a place convenient for fetching water, washed his hands, opened the food basket, and said to the young Brahman, "Please have some of this." But the man said, "Hey, Zhanchalovarna, I won't eat it." The bodhisattva replied, "ok". So instead of emptying the basket, he took out what he wanted to eat, put it on the leaves, tied the basket, and set it aside. Having eaten, drank, washed his hands and feet, picked up the rest of the food, the Bodhisattva said, "Young Brahman, let's go." So they began their journey. They walked all day, and after bathing in an accessible place in the evening, they came out of the water. The Bodhisattva stopped at an appropriate place, opened his basket, and began to eat, without saying anything to the young Brahman. However, the young Brahman was tired and hungry on the road. He stood and looked forward that "If he gives me food, I will take it." But the man just ate without saying a word. Then the young Brahman thought again, "This Zhanchalovarna did not say anything. He intended to eat all of it. I should ask him for it and throw away the part of the food he touched and ate the rest." He did so and ate the rest of the food. But after that, he thought: "What I have done is not commensurate with my Varna, with my birth, with my position. I ate the food saved by an inferior Varnas." He was so regretful that food and blood spurted from his mouth. He lamented bitterly, "how could I have committed a trifle" and made the following poem: "Reluctantly, he gave me some paltry surplus food, and I, a Brahman, ate it and immediately vomited it again." The young Brahman is so sad that he thought, "Since I have made such a mistake, there was no reason to live?" Next, he walked into the woods, never walked out and appeared in front of others, dying alone [11].

This story can briefly reflect what lower people faced in the society. The last one was "law", which can be interpreted as moral code. Unique combination of social and religious decrees led to social isolation. Caste system had a higher status than any political system, which made people keep loyal to social rules rather than their country. When invaders came, people tended to continue their work without feeling uneasy. In this way, high degree of political unity was rare. However, with continuous battles and violence, some countries became stronger and stronger. In the end, Peacock Empire defeated all opponents, becoming the biggest and the most concentrated countries with north-Asia subcontinent.

### 3 The Rise of Buddhism and Peacock Empire

Buddha was born in a chaotic era when different countries continuously attacked each other. In his way, the contraction between different class of people was sharp, leading to a lot of new ideas. At the same time, Brahmins still claimed that sacrifice was irreplaceable. However, the progress of productivity promoted the development of urbanization, and a part of Vaisya engaged in industry and started to become richer and richer. They were unsatisfied about lower political status. Wars between different regions greatly increased the strength of king. They seized more military and some of them decided to challenged Brahman. Those two become the class who supported Buddhism. Buddhism was first

founded by Buddha in the Ganges River Basin in the 6th century BC. It was people's opposition to hierarchical constraints reflecting on religions. What this paper want to do is not to discuss all thoughts of Buddhism, but to analyze its thoughts which fought against current social rules monopolized by Brahmanism. The first was "four truths", which was interpreted as suffering, the reason of suffering, extinction and the methods of eliminating suffering. On the one hand, it adapted to the reality of chaotic society where people desired to find a way to enjoy welfare. On the other hand, it also implied that the pain suffered by the majority of people was caused by Brahmins. However, Buddhism did not analyze the suffering of people with objective attitude, but tried to investigate its subjective reasons, which also reflected that Buddhism was unable to confront Brahmanism at that time. Buddhism also denied the existence of creator and affirmed the being of natural laws. It claimed that even the king of people was limited by them. Finally, Buddhism advocated the equality of all beings and believed that the difference of castes was due to different occupations rather than race and intelligence. In *Dirgha Agama-sutra*, a lot of Brahmins was described stupid and evil. In contrast, people in lower shew extraordinary intelligence. All in all, Buddhism provided Peacock Empire with an effective method, a guidance of unity rather than division.

The emergence of Magadha Empire provided a unified concept and perfect agricultural system for Peacock Dynasty. The founder of Peacock Empire first took advantage of the chaos caused by Alexander's invasion of India to control northwest India, and then attacked Magadha's capital, ending the rule of its former master. By the time of Ashoka, south India was also conquered, and whole of subcontinent was ruled by a single powerful regime at the first time. The central core of Peacock Dynasty was king, who controlled military, administrative, economic and judicial power of the country. The chancellor of economy and the minister of general revenue were responsible for the finance of Empire. Provincial system might be implemented locally and monitored by central supervisor dispatched by king. Autonomous councils in cities were also appointed by the central government. Monitored system served the king and was used to strengthen the control of empire. It can be seen that Peacock Dynasty's system at that time has been quite complete and effective. This phenomenon was unique in the history of India, which offer Ashoka a choice to make the most of his power to reshape his country.

#### **4 Law of Ashoka**

Ashoka continued to attack south India and completed the process of unifying south subcontinent in the first stage of his rule. However, when this unification was completed, many problems were immediately exposed in his huge empire. Although stories related to Ashoka said that Ashoka realized his evil of killing too many people and decided to reform his policy, it was more possible that he found the vulnerability of his country. The first was economic pressure. The economic pillar of Peacock Dynasty depended on farming economy of north India. Land revenue has become the source of government revenue, and taxation has brought a sense of security to revenue, on which an administrative system has been established. However, the agriculture in other places was still relatively backward, and peasants were often divided in lowest class, so the enthusiasm of agricultural production was not high. In this case, it was difficult for Peacock Dynasty

to replace Brahmanic caste system with strong state power. That was to replace religious loyalty with belongings of citizens. The second was distinctions between castes, which on the one hand caused the dissatisfaction of merchants which was formed by Vaisya. On the other hand, social isolation went even worse. It was manifested that people lost the sense of belonging of their country. Finally, localization of local officials made the positions of empire being monopolized in a solid group, and then tended to be out of control. This was the reality that Ashoka faced. As a centralized king, he exercised his power widely and launched a shaping campaign.

The core of Ashoka's policy was to release sharp contraction and strengthened unity. At the beginning, he announced General rule, which was a comparatively vague concept. It's brief meaning was an attitude of dealing with work with tolerance and non-injury. Ashoka used tolerance to treat all religions, including Buddhism, Brahmanism and others. He required individuals to show respect wherever they stayed or lived. It's undeniable that he take actions which was in support of Buddhism, he didn't oppressed Brahmanism. He presented a great number of money and foods to unite the members of it. Having faced with a lot of problems, he dispatched administrators to spread his general rule, asking people to respect each other and help their fellows in need, which was carved on stones within his empire. Combining those measures, Ashoka also organized a huge number of welfare, including building bathroom and allocated system, which was used to improve the situation of people, release rebel and stabilize society.

It was clear that Ashoka took Buddhism to reshape his empire. The reason why he chose Buddhism was multiple. Firstly, Buddhism emphasized the relationship between reason and outcome, asking people to improve their level of living by practicing Buddhism's details step by step. This theory tended to make people changing their class peacefully rather than in searching of violence. Secondly, Buddhism refused to admit racial differences in society and advocate that people should shoulder their responsibilities such as cultivating lands, keeping loyalty to their country and so on. Ashoka's policy was effectively since people's support accompanied 41 years when he ruled Peacock Empire [6]<sup>147</sup>. However, his dynasty was overthrown and his empire was destroyed within 50 years after his death.

Indeed, Ashoka's failure was due to his ambiguous policy, which didn't provide isolated society with a fundamental solution. For instance, tolerance was a brief call without other measures relating isolate carried by strong political power, which was useless and vulnerable. Excessive emphasis of theory and thought undermined political power. An Advanced History of India recorded that a general rebelled and destroyed Peacock with military power [12]. Moreover, agricultural economy was not successfully popularized within whole empire. It was impossible to maintain the empire only depending on northern economy, which caused a serious problem about revenue. Apart from that, Peacock's controlling system didn't permeate into village. People who believe Brahmanism carried their parents' work and married spouse in their unique system. In the end, Ashoka's advocacy of Buddhism introduced the contract theory to the origin of the country. The law (social order) is embodied in the cause theory of Buddhism, which provides rationality for the original social order with strict hierarchy. That was to say, priest had more power than king because they seemed to do more great things in the past.

In fact, after a thousand years of accumulation in social life, the caste system has been deeply rooted in the minds of most of Indians, and formed a social tradition and become part of Indian culture. Therefore, the tolerance and non-violence advocated by Ashoka can only be a false appearance of peace and prosperity. A more appropriate way may be focusing on the economy, cultivating a small-scale peasant class independent of rural communes with the land distributed by the state, increasing the links between laborers and the state, and providing funds for further measures. Meanwhile, it should change the bureaucratic local collectivization and strengthen the central control over the local areas so that it can gradually replace the caste system and become another acceptable hierarchy within the country. Religiously, raising the status of Brahmanism may be a better idea. Buddhism is mainly popular among Kshatriya, wealthy businessmen Vaisya and foreigners, which lacks a solid social foundation. Although Brahmanism emphasizes the caste system, its propagandized divine right of the king and sacrifice almighty can also serve the country. For instance, priest can use their power to grant legitimacy to the king of the country. Under the powerful centralization and military power of the Maurya Dynasty, the priests of Brahmanism would be willing to cooperate with the rulers.

In a word, in India with serious social division, reform must be based on strengthening the power of the state and weakening the concept of caste. The "law" cannot provide an effective solution for such a society that is full of contradictions.

## 5 Conclusion

Ashoka's attempt failed because he overemphasized a unpractical concept of tolerance as well as non-violence. He also didn't take practical measures of strengthening the concept of nationhood. However, Ashoka is still admirable because he recognized the need for a guiding principle and tried to provide it. Nowadays, the emblem of the Republic of India adopts the lion pillars, which carry the portrait of Ashoka. The action proves that the Indian people admire this king. India has legally abolished the caste system, but people's concept of caste is still obvious. Ashoka's experience may also apply to today's India, which should step on the world stage as a united nation rather than in a divided status. But this may not be achieved through one religion replacing another religion. It will be achieved through the country's effective reforms. The author believes that with growing national strength and economic progress, India will eventually overcome the narrow concept of caste and will eventually become a united nation.

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