Ashoka's Diplomatic Odyssey: Cultivating Dharma, Fostering Healing

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PATRICK OLIVELLE, NOV 21 2023

Ashoka, the last great Mauryan emperor, is one of the most iconic figures in Indian history. Under his rule (268-232 BCE) the Mauryan empire extended across almost the entirety of the Indian subcontinent. Apart from his effective reign over his vast kingdom, Ashoka is well known for his renunciation of war, his development of the concept of dhamma/dharma, his patronage of Buddhism and his promotion of religious harmony. Ashoka was fully aware that there were countries and rulers bordering his own empire. According to the general principles of ancient Indian political theory, these countries were considered enemy territories. Given the opportunity, they would have been prime targets for conquest either through diplomatic strategy or by military conquest, as seen in his Kalinga war. The post-Kalinga Ashoka, however, plots a different course.

He takes special note of these foreign countries in several of his inscriptions, referring to them interestingly as *avijita*, literally 'unconquered' lands at the borders, in contrast to his own imperial territory which, as we have seen, he refers to as *vijita*,'conquered'. These foreign lands are, however, mentioned not in the context of conquest or security, but in the context of Ashoka's various diplomatic and missionary activities. In these statements, we get an inkling of Ashoka's foreign policy and perhaps an inchoate theory of international relations. The independent Hellenistic kingdoms of West Asia provided a blueprint for Ashoka's own conception of an empire within settled borders.

In Rock Edict II, Ashoka refers to some of these frontier lands by name: the Tamil regions of Cola and Pandya, the Satiyaputras (probably a little north of Tamil Nadu), Kerala and Tamraparni or Sri Lanka. These are all on the southern borders of his empire. He then turns to the lands ruled by the Hellenistic king Antiochus, probably Antiochus II, the grandson of Seleucus, and by kings who are Antiochus's neighbours—all these are beyond his northwestern borders. We notice here an interesting difference. Ashoka refers to his southern neighbors anonymously using ethnic or geographical names, but in the case of the western Hellenistic regions, he refers to the kings by name. The same pattern occurs in Rock Edict XIII, where besides Antiochus, he mentions four other kings: Tulamaya, Antikini, Maka and Alikasundara. These have been identified as Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt (285–247 BCE), Antigonus Gonatas of Macedonia (276–239 BCE), Magas of Cyrene (death dated to between 258 and 250 BCE), and the last either Alexander of Corinth (252–244 BCE) or Alexander of Epirus (272–255 BCE). Ashoka places Antiochus at a distance of 600 *yojanas*.

Acknowledging the ambiguity of the actual length of the ancient Indian measure*yojana* in a given context and taking *yojana* as 7.2 kilometres, we can estimate that Antiochus was at a distance of about 4,320 kilometres, which is close to the actual distance between Pataliputra (Patna) in India and Antioch (Antakya) in Turkey. Did Ashoka know the distance because he was in diplomatic contact with Antiochus, who may also have been related to him by marriage?

Diplomatic connections with Hellenistic kings of the Middle East were fostered by Ashoka's father, Bindusara, and by his grandfather, Chandragupta, following the Treaty of the Indus. There was probably also a Greek presence in Pataliputra and Ashoka may have grown up in a cosmopolitan household. Paul Kosmin comments on the development of an 'international order' and of 'peer states with semiformalized procedures of interaction' in the Hellenistic west, so that regular diplomatic contacts may have become the norm. The Maurya rulers also were part of this 'international order' and may have considered themselves peers of those Hellenistic rulers. No such recognition

was given—at least by Ashoka—to the rulers of his southern border territories.

It is quite likely, then, that Ashoka, following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, established diplomatic relations not only with the Hellenistic kings in the west, but probably also with the rulers of the southern states outside his empire, what is today Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Sri Lanka. None of these diplomatic initiatives, however, are recorded in Ashoka's own inscriptions, which are focused on the propagation of dharma. This singular ancient Indian trait of ignoring its neighbours is noted by Romila Thapar:

Despite the proximity of the Hellenistic Greeks there is little that Indian sources have to say about them. If the Maurya sent ambassadors to the courts of the Seleucids, Ptolemies, and Macedonians there are no ambassadors journals; nor are there any records of enterprising merchants who may have travelled to and traded at the markets of Antioch and Alexandria. There is a curious lack of interest in exterior landscapes of other regions which pervades the Indian ethos of earlier times. (*Mauryas Revisited* 1987, p. 32)

There is no Indian Megasthenes. Ashoka does note, however, that he sent envoys to the rulers of these neighbouring countries to propagate dharma internationally. Significantly, the one place his diplomatic efforts feature prominently is Rock Edict XIII, which deals with his remorse at the carnage caused by his disastrous Kalinga war. Ashoka begins the edict with the bland statement: 'Eight years after the royal consecration of the Beloved of the Gods, King Piyadasi, the Kalingas were conquered.' He picks up on the word 'conquered' (*vijita*) in his discussion of diplomacy: 'This, however, is deemed the foremost conquest by the Beloved of Gods, namely, conquest through dharma.' The conquest he wants to achieve is not the usual armed victory, but the moral victory achieved through the acceptance of the moral code of dharma. Ashoka claims to have won this conquest among the neighbouring countries to the west and the south.

Ashoka did not limit his dharma mission to his own territory. He conceived of it as a worldwide mission, and in this he may have been inspired by the Buddhist vision of the Buddha's doctrine, unconstrained by culture and geography and spreading beyond the confines of what Ashoka calls Jambudvipa, the Indian subcontinent. For this larger mission beyond his territory, Ashoka deployed envoys, as we hear in Rock Edict XIII. He uses the term '*dūta*', which is the common term used in Indian texts on governance to refer to ambassadors sent by one king to another. But these were not normal diplomatic contacts. These envoys were charged with the special mission of converting the rulers and peoples beyond Ashoka's territory to the Ashokan 'cult of dharma'.

Here I want to highlight a few aspects of these missions that go beyond simply preaching dharma. As part of his efforts to propagate dharma both in his own territory and, especially, in border lands, Ashoka engaged in what today we would call foreign aid. In the case of Ashoka, it consisted principally of providing medical material and knowhow. He speaks of these medical missions in Rock Edit II:

Everywhere—in the territory of the Beloved of Gods, King Piyadasi, as well as in those at the frontiers, namely, Codas, Pandyas, Satiyaputras, Keralaputras, Tamraparnis, the Greek king named Antiochus, and other kings who are that Antiochus's neighbors—everywhere the Beloved of Gods, King Piyadasi, has established two kinds of medical services: medical services for humans and medical services for domestic animals.

Wherever medicinal herbs beneficial to humans and domestic animals were not found, he had them brought in and planted everywhere. Likewise, wherever root vegetables and fruit trees were not found, he had them brought in and planted everywhere.

Along roads he had trees planted and wells dug for the benefit of domestic animals and human beings.

Foreign aid in the service of diplomacy is well known even in modern times. Christian missionaries around the world did not go empty-handed. They also provided two principal kinds of services: medical and educational. Ashoka's diplomatic and missionary activities, thus, fall into a familiar paradigm. Predating modern missions by over two millennia, however, he was the pioneer in this regard.

But why did Ashoka single out medicine as an area where he could provide aid and exert influence? Did these countries lack medical knowledge and material? Did he think that he had better doctors and better medicines than others? It is instructive in this regard to look at the early history of Indian medicine, which later developed into the system of Ayurveda. Scholarship has thrown some light on that early history and its close association with the ascetic traditions, particularly Buddhism, in the region of Magadha, Ashoka's birthplace. The historian of medicine Kenneth Zysk makes the case succinctly:

A close scrutiny of the sources from the ninth century B.C.E. to the beginning of the common era reveals that medical practitioners were denigrated by the brāhmaṇic hierarchy and excluded from orthodox ritual cults because of their pollution from contact with impure people. Finding acceptance among the communities of heterodox ascetic renunciants and mendicants who did not censure their philosophies, practices, and associations, these healers, like the knowledge-seeking ascetics, wandered the countryside performing cures and acquiring new medicines, treatments, and medical information, and eventually became indistinguishable from the ascetics with whom they were in close contact. A vast storehouse of medical knowledge soon developed among these wandering physicians, who, unhindered by brāhmaṇic strictures and taboos, began to conceive an empirically and rationally based medical epistemology with which to codify and systematize this body of efficacious medical information. … Portions of the repository of medical lore were codified in early monastic rules, thereby giving rise to a Buddhist monastic medical tradition. (*Asceticism and Healing,* 1991, pp. 5–6)

The development of an empirical medical science and practice within Buddhism and in the heartland of the Maurya empire may have been a source of pride for Ashoka. Possibly, he received information about the lack of such practical medical expertise both in the outlying regions of his empire and in neighbouring countries. These regions may have been receptive to new forms of medicine and medical technology. If so, we can understand why Ashoka may have engaged in medical diplomacy.

The term '*cikisā*' (Sanskrit: *cikitsā*) in Ashoka's Rock Edict II, a term I have translated as 'medical service', has a spectrum of meanings, including medical treatment, medical practice and medical science. The related term '*cikitsaka*'is used frequently in early literature to refer to doctors, both for humans and for animals (veterinarians). Ashoka's own use of *cikisā* probably encompasses all these dimensions of the term. He probably sent medical practitioners along with their medical knowledge and the plants and herbs needed for the preparation of medicines. We can think of them as medical diplomats, working side by side with their political colleagues to further Ashoka's dharma mission.

Ashoka casts a long shadow over the *longue durée* of Indian history. In numerous areas of language, culture and religion we can—with the benefit of hindsight—see the impact of this unique ruler on India's long history. That is the unseen and mainly forgotten legacy of Ashoka. The Ashokan experiment of governance anchored in a universalist moral philosophy and religious ecumenism was unique and unprecedented in world history. An idealist at heart, he worked single-mindedly for over quarter of a century to further that goal. The reasons may be many, but this unique political, philosophical and religious experiment did not last many years following Ashoka's death.

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About the author:

Patrick Olivelle is Professor Emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin. He is a past President of the American Oriental Society and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Olivelle was awarded the honorary doctorate of Humane Letters by the University of Chicago in 2016, the 2017 Prize of Fondation Colette Caillat of the Institut de France, the Career Research Excellence Award by the University of Texas in Austin in 2011 and the Guggenheim Fellowship in 1996. He is the author of over thirty books, some of which have won awards from the American Academy of Religion and the Association of Asian Studies. He received his MA from Oxford University and

PhD from the University of Pennsylvania.