

# **ASHOKA'S POLICY OF *DHAMMA***

**Historical Background**

# Introduction

- Ashoka the son of Bindusara succeeded to the Mauryan throne in 269 C.E
- Until about a100 years ago he was merely one of the many king mentioned in the Mauryan dynastict list
- In1837 James Princep deciphered an inscription in Brahmi script of a king name *Devanampiya Piyadasi*(Beloved of God)
- Later many such inscriptions were discovered
- In 1915, another version of the edicts was discovered in which the king called himself *Devanampiya* Ashoka
- That established the fact that that both the name were of the same king, Ashoka

- Ashoka was regarded as one of the greatest king of the ancient world
- His greatness lays not in the vastness of his empire but primarily in his character and the principles and ideals for which he strove
- His only conquest was that of Kalinga(Odisha) which he undertook 8 years after his accession
- Though victorious, the scene of the battle field haunted him
- His remorse make him to find solace in Buddhism
- He got converted to Buddhism and contributed greatly in its spread in India and abroad
- This ultimately turned him to *Dhamma*

- *Dhamma* is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word *Dharma*
- It has been variously translated as piety, moral life, righteousness
- But it must be clearly understood that it was not any particular religious faith or practices
- To understand its various aspects and reason for formulation it is necessary to sketch its historical background

# **Socio-Economic background**

- Mauryas period witnessed a change in the economic structure
- Use of iron, resulting in surplus production which in turn led to development of trade
- Changeover took place from a simple rural economy to a pattern of economy in which towns and cities played an important part
- The emergence of urban culture by its very logic demanded a more flexible social organisation
- The commercial class had come to the forefront

- Incorporation of tribes and people from the outlying areas into the social fabric resulted into some problem
- Rigidity of the four fold *varna* division
- The commercial class were denied a higher status
- The rigidity sharpened the division in the society
- It was this situation which Ashoka inherited when he ascended the throne
- Therefore in an effort to solve some of these problem that a complex society faced he introduced the policy of *Dhamma*

# Religious Background

- Brahmanical hold over society came under increasing attack
- The privileges of the priests, rigidity of caste and elaborate rituals were being questioned
- Existence of other religious sects, such as Buddhism, Jainism and **Ajivikas**
- Brahmanism still continued to have a strong hold
- As a result hostility prevail
- To bring about harmony and mutual trust it is necessary to introduce policy that will be acceptable to all

# Political Background

- State had grown very elaborate and complex
- Political supremacy of one region(Magadha) over a vast territory
- Comprised of many previous kingdoms and areas where no organised states had existed before
- Existence within this vast territory, various geographical regions, multiple culture and diverse faiths, beliefs and practices
- Monopoly of force by a ruling class of which the king was the supreme head
- Existence of an administrative apparatus
- Appropriation of a very substantial quantity of surplus from agriculture, commerce and other sources



# Conclusion

- The complexity of the state system having diverse economy, religion and social structure required an imaginative policy with minimal use of force
- It could not be controlled by an army alone
- A feasible policy is needed which could reach to all section of the society
- That policy of *Dhamma* is such an endeavour