

King Asoka

273-232 B.C.

What type of society did Asoka exist in?

The commercial classes had come to the forefront of society. The emergence of urban culture demanded a flexible social organisation. The combining of tribes and peoples from remote areas into the social structure also presented a problem. Asoka promoted peace and spread unity amongst the different cultures.

What were the religious conditions?

The privileges of the priests, the rigidity of the caste system and the elaborate rituals were being questioned. The lower orders among the four sects began to favour new sects. The vaisyas, who were technically included in the higher social category, were treated as inferior to both Brahmans and Kshatriya. The opposition of the commercial class to Brahmanism was to give a fillip to the other sects of the society.

What were the religious conditions?

Buddhism began as schismatic movement from the more Orthodox outlook of Brahmanism. Its basic tenet was an emphasis on misery and advocacy of the middle path. It was a set of ethical principles. Buddhism opposed the dominance of the Brahmans and the concept of sacrifices and rituals. It thus appealed to lower social orders and to emerging social classes. The human approach to relations in society preached by Buddhism further attracted different sections to itself.

Edicts

- **Major Rock Edict 1** prohibits of animal sacrifice and holidays of festive gathering
- **Major Rock Edict 2** relates to measures of social welfare. It mentions medical treatment for men and animals, construction of roads, wells and tree planting
- **Major Rock Edict 3** declares that liberality towards Brahmans and Sramanas is a virtue, and that respecting one's parents is a good quality
- **Major Rock Edict 4** comments that because of the policy of Dhamma the lack of morality and disrespect towards Sramanas and Brahmans, violence, unseemly behaviour to friends, relatives and others, and evils of this kind have been checked. The killing of animals to a large extent was also stopped
- **Major Rock Edict 5** refers to the appointment of Dhamma-mahamatta for the first time in the twelfth year of his reign. These special officers were appointed by the king to look after the interests of all sects and religions and spread the message of Dhamma

Edicts

The principles of Dhamma were formulated to be acceptable to people belonging to different communities and following any religion. Dhamma was not given any formal definition or structure. It emphasized tolerance of people and the notion of showing consideration towards slaves and servants; there is stress on obedience to elders; generosity towards the needy, Brahmans and Sarmanas. Asoka pleaded for tolerance of different religious sects in an attempt to create a sense of harmony. The policy of Dhamma also laid stress on non-violence, which was to be practiced by giving up war and conquests and also as a restraint on the killing of animals. However, Ashoka realized that a certain display of his political might may be necessary to keep the primitive forest-dwelling tribes in check



THANKYOU