

## SOME ASPECTS OF ASOKAN EDICTS

The first Asokan Rock Edict ( RE I ) never was subject of any discussion, its content is quite clear: the king severely censures bloody sacrifices and announces his sincere devotion to vegetarian principles. One passage only seems to be obscure and is to be reconsidered: *asti pi tu ekaca samaja sadhumata devanampriyasa priyadasino rano* (according to Girnar version). The literal translation must be as follows: " But there are also some festivals meetings which are considered meritorious by king Devanampriya Priyadarsin " (E.Hultzsch); "There are, however, certain festive gatherings approved of as good by king Priyadarsin, Beloved of the gods" (B.Barua); "Il " a pourtant des assemblees speciales que le roi ami des dieux au regard amical considere comme bonnes "(J.Bloch); " There is, however, one kind of festive gathering, which is considered good" (D.C.Sirkar); "Es gibt aber auch gewisse Versammlungen, die vom Konig D.P. gurgeheissen werden" (U.Schneider); "although there are some festivals that Beloved-of-the-Gods, king Piyadasi, does approve of" (S.Dhammika).

No serious discrepancies are to be found in translations quoted above, but one fundamental problem nevertheless remains: what kind of festive gatherings, meetings or festivals the king had in mind. The general meaning of the term *samaja* is actually "festival", accompanied by music and dances, animal fights, sumptuous feasts and drinks (cf. KA II.25.36: *utsavasamajayatrasu caturahah sauriko deyah*). According to the same Edict, *samaja* is associated with non-vegetarian food. Asoka "sees much to object to in such festivals" (*bahukam hi dosam samajamhi pasati devanampriyo priyadasi raja*), just

because they are incompatible with his practice of ahimsa. So it is not difficult to comprehend, what is samaja and why "the festivals" are to be objected by the pious king.

But Asoka does not specify the "festivals", which are excluded from this prohibition and can be considered even as "meritorious" (sadhumata). Modern scholars try to find "good samajas" in some other Asokan Edicts. They assume, e.g., that "festive gatherings" can be identical with certain "theatrical performances" (dassana, diviyani lupani) supposed to be mentioned in the PE IV. It is not easy to concede this hypothesis. The king does not approve banquets with non-vegetarian food. What for he needs in this connection to make a proviso, that his disapproval does not apply to any "theatrical performance"?

Vegetarian principles clearly could be violated during such public shows II the latter had nothing to do at all with the problem of ahimsa, the subject of discussion in the given Rock Edict. Asoka's reservation as regards sadhumata samaja without any specification, which namely "festivals" are approved, seems to be meaningless. Such a proviso would be an enigma for the king's subjects II unlike modern indologists they had no chance to compare the RE I with others, later proclaimed.

It is useful to pay attention to the structure of the text as a whole and to analyze the position of the passage in question therein. The first part of Edict contains disapproval of bloody sacrifices and festivals, the second one is devoted to Asoka's vegetarian practice. Contrary to the usage of the past the king promises to give up in future every kind of non-vegetarian food. The phrase about "good festivals" stands just between these two parts, occupying the central position. It does not

contain any proviso to the former objection of festive gatherings. Asoka contrasts all the festivals, to be objected, with certain "meritorious" or dhamma-samaja, to be described immediately. Such a construction is very typical for his Edicts: "In the past times... improper behavior... has increased. But now... proper behavior ... and the sons and grandsons will continue to promote Dhamma-practice" etc. "One kind of festivals, which is considered good" is not to be taken in a literal sense of the word. It is metaphorical expression to denote the vegetarian practice of the king: Dhamma-festival consisted in his observing the rules of ahimsa.

It is well known fact, that Asokan Edicts are not administrative documents, they are fine specimens of a literary tradition, rich in figures of speech. Their characteristic feature is the use of traditional terms in a new and unusual sense. Some compounds are built with the help of the word dhamma: dhammavijaya, dhammadana, dhammamangala - their meanings are far from the ordinary ones (victory, gift etc). It would be risky to interpret Asoka's dhammavijaya in conformity with Sanskrit dharmavijaya. The latter term is opposed to lobhavijaya and asuravijaya (KA XII.I.10 f). Dharmavijayi king is ever fighting with his neighbors, following his Ksatriya-dhamma only. As a noble (dharma) conqueror, he does not pretend to the wealth or life of defeated enemies. But Asoka's dhammavijaya does not presuppose any battles at all. By his activity in disseminating Dhamma throughout the world the ruler becomes to be victorious, i.e. King of Dhamma. Such a dhammavijaya has nothing in common with ordinary vijaya as "victory", "conquering" something by military operations.

The same transformation has taken place with the word dana - "gift" or "generosity". It is said in the RE XI

that "there is no such gift as dhammadana". It would be useless to compare this dhammadana with the concept of dharmadana in Sanskrit literature. The authors of Dharmasastra s explain, that dharmadana is nothing more, than a gift to a decent person (srotriya, sadhu ets), and not to a worthless one - a gambler, actor or prostitute (cf. KA III.16.4). Asoka had in mind something different: his dhammadana is not "dana in accordance with dharma", but "dana of dhamma" itself (doctrine or morality). It is identical with "the gift of the sight" (cakhudana) mentioned in the second Pillar Edict. So gift of some material object is transformed into spiritual admonition.

The RE XI, cited above, is rather difficult to translate literally, because its author deliberately plays with words as metaphorical expressions. He uses the terms appropriate for the context of dana: (dana)samstavo, samvibhago, sambandho, or the eulogy of a gift, its partition among the recipients and the close relations established between all the participants in the act of giving and receiving of a gift (cf. Gautama Dh.S.V.19.20; Apastamba Dh.S. II.9.10;II.13.11). All these words are compounded by Asoka not with dana, but with dhamma: dhammasamstavo, dhammasamvibhago, and dhammasambandho. Dana thereby was identified with dhamma and even superseded by the latter.

So the best of victories consists in refusal from any wars, the best of gifts is nothing more, than spiritual instruction. According to the RE IX, the best of "auspicious rites" (mamgala) too is "ceremony of Dhamma", i.e. pious behavior towards servants, friends or elders, not the "rites" in the proper sense of the word, but fulfillment of certain social norms (as in Sigalovada Sutta of Pali Canon). In the Rock Edict VIII viharayata, or pleasure-tour becomes to be dhammayata, or pilgrimage.

Not rarely Asoka uses even the same vocabulary: "In the past the kings used to go out on pleasure tours... for hunting and other entertainments (abhilama)..." . But now the king Piyadasi goes on a tour to Sambodhi and finds therein "pleasure" (rati, or abhilama, according to Kalinga version). In the first case abhilama is to be interpreted as an amusement, in the second one it is high spiritual "delight".

The central concept of the RE I is samaja, of the RE VIII - mamgala, of the RE X - yasas and kirti, of the RE XI - dana, of the RE XIII - vijaya. These and other traditional terms are to be considered as an aggregate. They reflect with remarkable completeness Vedic ideal of chief and leader. The perfect ruler of the tribal state must be martial and always ready to conduct military expeditions or to enjoy himself in hunting sport (yatra). After victory (vijaya) the king brings home abundant loots to give (dana) them to his people and to sacrifice them to the gods during magnificent festivals (samaja) with auspicious rites (mamgala). The result of such a royal activity must be his fame and glory (yasas, kirti) forever. Asoka transforms all these concepts with help of the term dhamma.

The victory, gift, religious ceremonies and festivities --everything is converted into the practice of Dhamma and its propagation. Asoka formulated new "Konigsideal" by revision of traditional ideas and terms. Using royal terminology of the times past, he resolutely changed the meanings. Contrary to the ancient legends and conceptions of some modern writers, his motive certainly never was to give up the regnal functions. Just opposite, he was anxious about legitimating of his power. The techniques used for reformulation of the Vedic concepts were the same as those elaborated in the early Buddhist

texts, and Dhamma was an apt instrument to achieve this goal.

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