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## Ashoka's Welfare State: A Social Revolution in Ancient India

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### **Abstract:**

*This research examines the concept of welfare-oriented governance under Ashoka, highlighting how his reign marked a significant transformation in the theory and practice of kingship in ancient India. Departing from the traditional model of conquest-based authority established by earlier Mauryan rulers such as Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka redefined political power through moral responsibility, social welfare, and ethical statecraft. The study explores the ideological foundation of his policy of Dhamma, which functioned not as a sectarian religious doctrine but as a universal moral code promoting non-violence, compassion, tolerance, justice, and respect for all living beings.*

*The research analyzes Ashoka's welfare measures, including public health initiatives, infrastructure development, humane judicial reforms, protection of vulnerable groups, and environmental consciousness. It also evaluates the ethical and cultural dimensions of his governance, particularly his advocacy of religious pluralism and moral education. Further, the study investigates Ashoka's innovative approach to international relations, characterized by peaceful diplomacy, humanitarian outreach, and the spread of ethical values beyond imperial boundaries.*

*While acknowledging the limitations and criticisms of his model—especially its dependence on personal moral authority—the research argues that Ashoka's reign represents one of the earliest historical examples of a welfare state rooted in ethical governance. His legacy continues to influence Indian political thought and remains relevant to contemporary discussions on inclusive, humane, and morally accountable leadership.*

**Keywords:** *Ashoka, Dhamma, Welfare State, Ethical Governance, Mauryan Empire, Religious Tolerance, Non-Violence (Ahimsa), Social Reforms, Moral Diplomacy, Humane Justice*

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Ashoka, the Mauryan ruler of the third century BCE, is remembered for reshaping the idea of kingship in ancient India. In a period when most monarchs measured their success by territorial expansion and military dominance, Ashoka gradually moved toward a model of rule grounded in ethics and public welfare. His reign reflects an unusual concern for moral responsibility, social harmony, and

the well-being of his subjects. Instead of depending entirely on force and fear, he sought to legitimize authority through compassion, justice, and active concern for society. In doing so, he laid the foundations of what may be described as an early welfare-oriented state. Ashoka inherited a vast and efficiently organized empire created by Chandragupta Maurya and strengthened by Bindusara. The Mauryan administration was centralized and disciplined, but it was also supported by military power and strict control. During the initial phase of his reign, Ashoka followed this conventional pattern. However, the Kalinga War profoundly altered his outlook. The scale of destruction and human suffering left a deep impression on him. Unlike many rulers who glorified conquest, Ashoka admitted remorse in his inscriptions and reflected on the pain caused by war. This experience transformed his understanding of power and redefined his sense of duty as a king.

After this turning point, Ashoka adopted Dhamma as the guiding principle of governance. Dhamma was not a sectarian doctrine but a practical moral philosophy meant for everyday life. It emphasized non-violence, respect for elders, compassion, generosity, tolerance, and kindness toward all living beings. By keeping its message broad and inclusive, Ashoka ensured that people of different faiths and communities could accept it. He focused on ethical conduct rather than ritual practice, encouraging a shared moral framework that could unite his diverse empire. Importantly, Ashoka believed that moral values should influence public administration. To promote these principles, he appointed officials known as Dhamma Mahamattas to supervise social welfare and encourage righteous behavior. He also made himself accessible to his subjects, declaring that he was ready to hear their concerns at all times. This emphasis on accountability and service highlighted his belief that a ruler's authority must rest on the welfare of the people.

Ashoka's concern for public welfare was visible in his development projects. He supported the construction of roads, wells, rest houses, and irrigation systems to facilitate agriculture, trade, and communication. Trees were planted along highways to provide shade, and public amenities were created for the benefit of travelers and local communities. These initiatives improved daily life and contributed to economic stability. His administration also introduced arrangements for medical treatment for both humans and animals, along with the cultivation and distribution of medicinal plants. Ashoka's sensitivity toward animal life was evident in his efforts to regulate hunting and limit unnecessary slaughter. By extending care beyond human society, he broadened the meaning of welfare and reinforced the principle of respect for all forms of life.

In matters of justice, Ashoka encouraged moderation and mercy. While the legal system continued to operate, he instructed officials to avoid harsh punishments and to consider reform as the purpose of discipline. Prisoners were sometimes granted relief or opportunities for appeal, reflecting his desire to temper justice with compassion. Religious tolerance formed another cornerstone of his rule. Although he personally embraced Buddhism, he did not attempt to impose it on his subjects.

Instead, he promoted mutual respect among different religious communities and warned against sectarian hostility. Through this inclusive approach, he aimed to preserve unity within a culturally diverse empire.

Ashoka's model of governance did not revolutionize political structures overnight; rather, it transformed the ethical foundation of kingship. He redefined the role of the ruler as a moral guardian responsible for the material and spiritual well-being of the people. Although many of his initiatives weakened after his death, the ideals he articulated—compassionate rule, social welfare, and religious tolerance—continued to influence Indian political thought for centuries.

### **Ideological Foundation:**

Ashoka built his system of governance upon the principle of Dhamma, which served as the moral core of his rule and distinguished it from earlier models of kingship centered on conquest and coercive authority. His rock and pillar edicts reveal that Dhamma was not intended as a strict theological doctrine. Instead, it functioned as a broad ethical framework designed to shape personal conduct and inform public administration. Although Ashoka personally followed Buddhism, the Dhamma he promoted was inclusive and universal, meant to guide all subjects of the Mauryan Empire regardless of religion, caste, or social background.

At its heart, Dhamma emphasized moral discipline and social balance. It encouraged non-violence, compassion, restraint, respect for parents and elders, considerate treatment of servants and dependents, generosity toward Brahmanas and Shramanas, and acceptance of diverse religious traditions. Ashoka minimized the importance of elaborate rituals and sacrificial ceremonies, arguing that genuine devotion lay in upright behavior rather than outward displays of religiosity. Through this approach, Dhamma aimed to cultivate inner moral improvement and reduce conflict within society by promoting a humane and tolerant outlook.

From an ethical standpoint, Dhamma advanced principles such as honesty, mercy, and empathy. Ashoka's rejection of violence extended beyond rhetoric; he introduced measures to restrict animal slaughter and encouraged humane treatment within the judicial system. His public regret over the devastation of war reinforced his commitment to what he described as moral conquest—winning loyalty through persuasion and righteousness instead of military force. In this way, Dhamma provided a guiding code not only for subjects but also for the ruler himself.

On a social level, Dhamma sought to strengthen unity across a vast and culturally diverse empire. Ashoka repeatedly advised against criticizing other religious communities and instead promoted dialogue and mutual respect. This policy of tolerance created a shared ethical space in which multiple traditions could coexist peacefully. The welfare initiatives he introduced—such as building roads, digging wells, establishing rest houses, and arranging medical care for people and animals—demonstrated that Dhamma also carried a strong sense of social responsibility. Governance, in this

vision, was inseparable from concern for public well-being.

Administratively, Ashoka translated moral ideals into institutional practice. He appointed Dhamma Mahamatras to oversee ethical conduct, protect marginalized groups, and supervise justice. Officials were instructed to act with patience, fairness, and compassion, while the king accepted personal responsibility for the happiness and moral progress of his subjects. By embedding ethical accountability within administration, Ashoka reshaped kingship into a form of moral stewardship.

Overall, Ashoka's Dhamma represented an innovative ideological foundation for governance. By framing it as a universal ethical policy rather than a sectarian creed, he advanced a model of rule rooted in tolerance, welfare, and moral responsibility. His experiment in ethical statecraft remains one of the earliest and most striking examples of humane governance in ancient India.

### **Welfare Measures and Social Reforms:**

Ashoka demonstrated through his welfare initiatives and social reforms that governance, in his view, extended far beyond taxation and military success. He considered it the moral obligation of a ruler to lessen suffering and enhance the quality of everyday life. Inspired by the ethical principles of Dhamma, he attempted to shape an administration rooted in compassion, responsibility, and practical concern for society. His reform measures addressed key areas such as healthcare, infrastructure, justice, and the protection of vulnerable communities.

A significant dimension of his welfare policy was public health. Ashoka arranged medical facilities for both people and animals—an approach that was remarkably forward-thinking for its time. He encouraged the cultivation and distribution of medicinal herbs and ensured that treatment was accessible across different regions of the empire. His inclusion of animals within state care reflected his deep commitment to non-violence and reverence for life. By recognizing the wellbeing of animals alongside that of humans, he broadened the scope of state responsibility and fostered a more compassionate social ethos.

Infrastructure development also formed a core component of his reforms. Ashoka recognized that prosperity and stability depended on strong physical networks and public amenities. Roads were constructed to link distant provinces, facilitating trade and communication. Wells were excavated to secure drinking water, and irrigation works were promoted to strengthen agriculture. Rest houses were built along important routes to assist travelers and merchants, while trees were planted to provide shade and environmental comfort. These improvements not only stimulated economic activity but also signaled that the state was attentive to the daily needs of its population.

In the sphere of justice, Ashoka advocated moderation and humanity. He discouraged harsh or excessive punishment and emphasized fairness, patience, and the possibility of reform. Officials were advised to approach legal matters with sensitivity, and prisoners were granted opportunities for appeal

or temporary relief on certain occasions. This approach reflected his belief that justice should aim at moral correction rather than vengeance, preserving the dignity of individuals even when they had erred. Ashoka's broader social vision included concern for groups often neglected in ancient societies. Women, children, the elderly, prisoners, and marginalized communities received particular attention under his administration. Through appointed officers, he sought to ensure that these sections were treated with respect and fairness. Although he did not radically alter existing social hierarchies, his policies encouraged a more humane exercise of authority and reduced unnecessary hardship. In this way, his welfare measures embodied an early effort to align state power with ethical responsibility and social care.

### **Ethical and Cultural Dimensions:**

Ashoka sought to reshape his empire not merely through administrative control but by nurturing a moral transformation within society. In the aftermath of the Kalinga conflict, he became convinced that enduring stability could not rest solely on military dominance. Instead, he concluded that true peace required compassion, tolerance, and reverence for life. These convictions found expression in his policy of Dhamma, which functioned as a moral compass intended to influence both personal conduct and the broader cultural fabric of the Mauryan realm.

A central ethical feature of his governance was the promotion of religious coexistence. The Indian subcontinent during his reign was home to multiple traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, Brahmanical practices, Ajivika teachings, and various local cults. Although Ashoka personally embraced Buddhism, he did not attempt to enforce it as a state religion. His inscriptions emphasize respect for all sects and warn against praising one's own faith while condemning others. He extended patronage and protection to diverse religious communities, demonstrating that the state's responsibility was to maintain harmony rather than privilege a single tradition. By encouraging dialogue and mutual regard, he aimed to cultivate a peaceful and culturally integrated empire.

Another defining element of Ashoka's ethical outlook was his attention to animal life and the natural environment. Guided by the principle of non-violence, he introduced measures to limit animal sacrifice, regulate hunting, and prohibit certain forms of cruelty. Some species received special protection, and unnecessary slaughter was discouraged. References in his edicts to tree planting and resource preservation indicate an early recognition of environmental stewardship. These actions reveal his belief that moral responsibility extended beyond human relationships to encompass all living beings and the natural world.

Moral instruction also played a key role in Ashoka's cultural policy. He maintained that laws and punishments alone could not sustain social order; ethical awareness among citizens was equally essential. Through his edicts, he advocated virtues such as respect for parents and elders, kindness toward dependents, generosity toward religious practitioners, and humane treatment of prisoners. He

underscored the importance of self-restraint, truthfulness, and empathy in daily life. To ensure that these principles were widely communicated, he appointed officials to disseminate the message of Dhamma throughout the empire.

By prioritizing ethical cultivation, Ashoka attempted to influence not only the actions but also the character of his people. His emphasis on tolerance, compassion, and moral accountability encouraged individuals to act out of understanding rather than fear. In doing so, he contributed to a broader cultural shift that linked political authority with ethical responsibility and fostered a more humane social order.

### **Impact, Criticism, and Legacy:**

The policies introduced by Ashoka significantly altered the character of governance in ancient India. Prior to his reign, the state was largely perceived as a structure designed to enforce order, collect revenue, and expand territory through military strength. Ashoka redefined this perception by portraying the ruler as a custodian of moral and social welfare. He placed compassion, justice, and ethical responsibility at the heart of administration, thereby softening the image of kingship from one rooted in fear to one grounded in care. His approach shifted attention toward reducing suffering and fostering harmony, creating a model of governance in which public welfare became a central objective rather than a secondary concern.

However, the implementation of such an ethically driven system was not without obstacles. Governing a vast and culturally diverse empire posed logistical challenges, especially in an era of limited communication and administrative reach. The success of many of Ashoka's reforms relied heavily on his personal dedication and authority. Without strong institutional mechanisms to sustain them, several initiatives gradually lost momentum after his death. Some historians suggest that an increased reliance on moral persuasion and non-violence may have weakened the empire's military readiness, potentially contributing to the eventual decline of the Mauryan state. These critiques underline the tension between lofty ethical aspirations and the practical demands of ruling a large empire.

When compared with other rulers of antiquity, Ashoka's model stands out distinctly. Earlier Mauryan leadership under Chandragupta Maurya emphasized centralized administration and military discipline, while figures such as Alexander the Great pursued renown through conquest and expansion. In contrast, Ashoka renounced aggressive warfare following the Kalinga campaign and promoted what he described as moral conquest—winning allegiance through ethical conduct rather than force. Whereas many monarchs derived legitimacy from military success, Ashoka sought it through righteousness and service to his subjects. This divergence underscores the exceptional nature of his kingship in the ancient world.

Ashoka's influence on Indian political thought has endured for centuries. His articulation of

righteous governance, accountability, and welfare-conscious leadership became embedded in broader philosophical traditions. Later rulers and thinkers drew upon his example of compassionate authority as an ideal of moral kingship. In modern India, his legacy remains highly visible; the national emblem and symbols associated with the state reflect his enduring significance. The principles of social justice, equality, and public welfare enshrined in the Constitution of India echo many of the values he championed long ago.

In contemporary discussions of governance, Ashoka's experiment continues to offer meaningful insights. His stress on tolerance, humane justice, and state responsibility toward vulnerable communities resonates with present-day ideals of inclusive leadership. Although shaped by the conditions of his own era, his vision of ethically guided administration remains a powerful reference point for debates on responsible and compassionate statecraft.

### **International Relations and Welfare Diplomacy:**

Ashoka adopted an approach to foreign relations that differed sharply from the militaristic diplomacy common in the ancient world. In the period following the Kalinga conflict, he deliberately moved away from expansionist ambitions and embraced a policy grounded in peace, ethical influence, and public welfare. He came to view genuine power as the ability to earn trust and goodwill rather than to dominate through force. As a result, external relations became closely linked to his broader moral philosophy, turning diplomacy into an extension of his vision of compassionate governance.

His inscriptions indicate that he cultivated amicable ties with neighboring regions and distant kingdoms. Instead of pursuing intimidation or conquest, he promoted coexistence and respect. He described surrounding communities as border peoples and emphasized cordial interaction over rivalry. This approach aimed to foster stability through cooperation, thereby reducing the likelihood of conflict. By placing peace at the center of interstate relations, Ashoka redefined the purpose of diplomacy in moral rather than strategic terms.

A distinctive element of his foreign policy was the dispatch of missions to areas such as Sri Lanka, parts of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and territories influenced by the Hellenistic world. These were not military campaigns but emissary efforts carrying the message of Dhamma. The envoys, often including Buddhist monks, shared principles such as non-violence, tolerance, and ethical self-restraint. Their objective was not territorial control but moral dialogue and cultural exchange. Through such initiatives, Ashoka sought to shape relationships through shared values rather than political domination.

Humanitarian assistance also formed part of this outward-looking policy. His edicts refer to arrangements for medical care and the supply of medicinal herbs beyond his own frontiers. This suggests that he viewed welfare as a responsibility extending across political boundaries. By offering medical support and practical aid, he reinforced bonds of goodwill and demonstrated that diplomacy

could be rooted in concern for human well-being. Such gestures were unusual in the context of ancient interstate relations and reflected the ethical orientation of his rule.

Ashoka further encouraged rulers outside his empire to consider principles of humane governance. Rather than imposing authority, he relied on example and persuasion, hoping that moral administration would spread organically. His diplomatic model illustrates how compassion and ethical responsibility can function as instruments of international engagement. Through peaceful outreach, cultural missions, and humanitarian cooperation, he developed a form of welfare-oriented diplomacy that remains one of the earliest known attempts to align foreign policy with moral ideals and shared human values.

### **Conclusion:**

Ashoka's welfare state represents one of the most remarkable experiments in ethical governance in ancient history. His reign brought a significant transformation in the purpose and character of the state. Instead of relying solely on military strength and authority, Ashoka redefined kingship as a moral responsibility rooted in compassion, justice, and public welfare. Through the principle of Dhamma, he attempted to create a society based on tolerance, non-violence, and mutual respect. His policies in public health, infrastructure development, humane justice, social protection, and international welfare diplomacy reflect a ruler deeply concerned with reducing suffering and promoting harmony.

Ashoka's approach reshaped the relationship between the state and society by presenting the ruler as a guardian of moral and social well-being. Although his reforms faced practical limitations and depended largely on his personal commitment, their ethical vision was revolutionary for its time. His emphasis on religious tolerance, environmental care, and welfare-oriented administration demonstrated that power could be exercised with responsibility and humanity.

Overall, Ashoka's welfare state can be understood as a social revolution that transformed governance into a tool for moral upliftment and collective welfare. His legacy continues to inspire discussions on ethical leadership, social justice, and inclusive governance, making his reign a lasting example of humane statecraft in world history.

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