

II-5. Socio-political Context

Motivated by sympathy for emperors and lions history is polluted as new correcting fluids are invented for each age. Reality is flattened and artifacts are created as dimension of time is removed and those of emotions and concerns are excised. If diachronic can be flattened into synchronic, the reverse should also be possible through thought aided by creative imagination.

All the Arihants lived in the plains of the Ganga valley of North India. This 1500 x 800 mile region has many rivers fed by the Himalayan glaciers. They remain navigable most of the year, possibly except in the monsoon season. It was one of the most fertile regions of India. The river trade contributed to prosperity and influx of new ideas. City-states had existed in this region at least since 1800 BCE. Some of these had tradition of organized social institutions, tax system, and support for common endeavors by state as well as through private charity. By 1000 BCE it was already in extensive communication through the river-ways. Geographical location of Patliputr (Figure II-1 and 2) made it an important center of commerce and culture.

Both Mahaveer and Buddh were born as prince in two of the city states of this region. The only significant difference between their upbringings was that while growing up Buddha lived a very sheltered life, whereas Mahaveer was encouraged to interact with all. Both renounced comforts to seek satisfaction and fulfillment through ascetic life. Even to this day both the traditions appeal to people who have had their survival needs

fulfilled. Possibly only such people can take a long-term view of the human condition.

Both Mahaveer and Buddha actively opposed division of humans on the basis of birth. They argued that rather than traditional *Jati* (family trade) or the *Varn* (social order) it is the individual behavior that shapes personal identity and growth. Three centuries later the Maurya Emperor Ashok developed these ideas as *Dhamma* code of conduct for a social contract for peaceful coexistence. These three are the only Indians who are included in a ranking by John Hart (1972) among *The 100 Most Influential* in the recorded world history. Not coincidentally, their ideas are also the bed rock of the secular and pluralistic republic of modern India.

Excerpts from Edicts of Piyadassi Ashok (ca. 265 to 230 BC) on stone inscriptions on *Dhamma*: A secular social code of conduct and social contract for peaceful coexistence.

- The beloved of the Gods, Piyadassi the King, has had this inscription on *Dhamma* engraved. Here no living thing is to be killed or sacrificed. Piyadassi sees much evil in holding of festivals. Killing of animals in the Royal kitchen is also reduced.

- Medical services for the care of humans and of animals have been provided in the domains of the Piyadassi and the neighboring kingdoms. Medicinal herbs have been planted where they do not grow. Along the roads wells have been dug and trees planted for the use of men and beasts.

- Officers of the state will go on regular tours for other duties and to instruct and explain *Dhamma* to people. It is good to be

obedient to one's mother and father, friends and relatives, to be generous to Brahmans and Shramans, not to kill living beings, to spend little and own minimum of property.

- Standing firm on Dhamma the king Piyadassi, his sons, his grandsons and his great grandsons will advance the practice of law until the end of the world. But there is no practice of Dhamma without goodness, and in these matters it is good to progress and not to fall back or be satisfied with shortcomings.

- It is hard to do good. He who does good does a difficult thing. But he who neglects my reforms even in part will do wrong, for sin is easy to commit. I have appointed officers of Dhamma for the welfare and happiness, and administration of charities among those devoted to Dhamma. They are busy in promoting the welfare of prisoners should they behave irresponsibly, or releasing those that have children, are afflicted, or are aged. May it endure long and may my descendents conform to it.

- At all times, whether I am eating, or am in the women's apartments, or in my inner apartments, or at the cattle-shed, or in my carriage, or in my garden's - where ever I may be, my informants should keep me in touch with public business. Thus everywhere I transact public business. Any dispute about anything I order is to be reported to me immediately at all places and at all times. I find no satisfaction in the hard work of the dispatch of business alone. I consider that I must promote the welfare of the whole world. Hard work and the dispatch of business are the means of doing so. Indeed there is no better work than promoting the welfare of the whole world. Whatever may be my great deeds, I have done them in order to discharge my debt

to all beings. May it endure long, but this is difficult without great effort.

- Piyadassi wishes that all sects may dwell in all places. All men seek self-controls and purity of mind but have varying desires and varying passions. They will either practice all that is required or else only a part. But even he who is generous, yet has no self-control, purity of mind, gratitude, and firm faith, is regarded as mean.

- People, especially women, practice various ceremonies and rituals that are trivial and useless, doubtful and ineffective. On the other hand, effectiveness of Dhamma is lasting --- because it makes possible for people to escape evil inclinations. But this is difficult for men, whether humble or highly placed, without extreme effort and without renouncing everything else, and it is particularly difficult for the highly placed.

- Piyadassi honors all sects and both ascetics and laymen, and considers essential the advancement of the essential doctrine of all sects. It takes many forms, but its basis is the control one's speech, so as not to extol one's own sect or disparage another's on unsuitable occasions, or at least do so mildly on certain occasions. On each occasion one should honor another man's sect, for by doing so one increases the influence of one's own sect and benefits that of the other another man. Whosoever honor his own sect or disparages that of another man, wholly out of devotion to his own with a view of showing it in a favorable light, harms his own sect even more seriously. It is the desire of Piyadassi that all sects should be well informed.

- Piyadassi feels remorse that during the conquest of the kingdom of Kaling a hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed, and many times that number perished. It is also deplorable that the survivors of the war continue to suffer from the violence, separation of their loved ones, and misfortune of others. This participation of all men in suffering weighs heavily on the mind of Piyadassi.

- Since the empire is large, much has been engraved and much has yet to be engraved. There is considerable repetition because of the beauty of certain topics, and in order that the people may conform to them. In some places it may be inaccurately engraved, whether by the omission of a passage or by lack of attention, or by the error of the engraver.

Note: These excerpts are selected from the fourteen major rock inscriptions that mainly relate to the thought behind the policy of Dhamma [Excerpted from *Ashoka* by Romila Thapar (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997)]. Twenty-eight edicts of Ashok are known. The pillar edicts address more direct political issues, where as the minor edicts relate to the decisions of more personal nature in relation to the Buddhist practices. All but one edict is in Prakrit language in Brahmi script. The Kandhahar edict is bilingual in Greek and Aramaic. This is particularly significant because the Sanskrit Grammarian Panini lived in Kandahar.

Social and political forces strengthened by geography of the region played an important role in shaping the ideas of Mahaveer and Budhha. Agricultural sufficiency of the fertile Ganga valley brought influx of people with diverse know how and beliefs. By 600 BCE the city states of the Eastern Ganga Valley

region was brimming with ideas and practices. Some of these states were consolidated under the political umbrella of the Magadh Empire. This meant paying tribute (taxes) to the emperor (*Chakravarti*, or the "consolidator" of the domain). During the rule of Shrenik (Bimbisar), mentioned in the Jain texts, Rajgrahi was capital of the empire. His son (Table II-2) Ajatshatru mentioned in the Buddhist texts moved the capital from Rajgrahi to Patligram (later to become Patliputr or modern Patana). The reason being Patliputr is at the cross roads of several navigable rivers, and therefore suited for collecting taxes. He had governors stationed in Ujjain (Avanti) about 1000 miles to the south-west.

Table II-2. Chronology of Magadh and Maurrya Empires with Patliputr as the Capital

<i>Reign BCE</i>	<i>Ruler</i>	<i>Supported</i>
604-540	Shrenik (Bimbisar)	Mahaveer
560-490	Ajatshatru (Kunik)	Buddha
490-467	Udayi	Buddhist
467-458	Anuruddh	?
458-449	Munnd	?
449-410	SusuNag	?
410-324	Nand dynasty (4)	?
324-298	Chandrgupt	Jin monks
298-273	Bindusar	Buddhist
273-232	Ashok	Buddhist
232-185	Kunal	Buddhist

Both Mahaveer and Buddh were born about 200 miles north of Patliputr, near the foothills of Himalay. It is not clear if the city-state of their parents came under the domain of the Magadh Empire. However, Shrenik and his wife Chelna were followers of Mahaveer and strong supporters of the tradition. On

the other hand, their son Ajatshatru (Kunik) was a follower of Buddh. The idea of religion, and certainly the idea of faith from birth or of the state religion or the dogma-based-practice, was alien in these parts at that time.

It is intriguing that about 300 years later the Patliputr region became inhospitable to both of these indigenous thoughts. Just as the European Colonial Powers used Machiavellian ways to exploit native people, the Ary of the Ganga Valley began to systematically harden the *Varn* system proposed by Manu (ca. 700 BC). Some of these ideas about personal and social conduct are found in the work of Vishnu Gupt (400 AD) who apparently compiled the practices from the period of Chanakya Kautilya.

Chandrgupt Maurrya (-324c) overthrew the Magadh Empire with the help of Chanakya Kautilya and the Chief Minister Shaktal of Magadh who also unhappy with the Nand emperor of the time. Both Chanakya and Shaktal were Brahmins. Origins of Chandrgupt, the founding Emperor of the Maurrya Empire, are not known. It is believed that Chandrgupt later became a Jain monk. The next two Maurrya emperors, the son and grandson of Chandrgupt, adopted the thoughts of Buddh. This is the golden age in the history of India. However, by then the tide from the West had already turned against the indigenous thought. The chain of events leading up to the golden age and its demise are outlined in Essay II-6.

Law of Social Cycles: R. R. Sarkar has revived the ancient idea of social cycles to understand the chaos of history. Basically such cycles follow the order of intellectual development, grandeur of acquisitions (formation of empires), the general well being of most of the social groups, and ultimately the decay of the empire. See also *The Rise and Fall of Empires* by Paul Kennedy (1987).

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