

... are unrecorded. **Ashoka's Dhamma**  
It was against this background that Ashoka expounded his policy of dhamma to eliminate social tension and sectarian conflicts, and to promote a harmonious relationship between the diverse elements of the vast empire. Dhamma is the Prakrit equivalent of the Sanskrit word dharma, translated as religion in modern times. But the term used in the Ashokan edicts has a much wider connotation. It indicates more than mere piety resulting from good deeds inspired by any formal religious faith. Ashoka's insistence on abstinence from killing,

considerate relationship between parents and children, elders and young people, friends, masters and servants, and various religious sects, and his excessive concern for the general welfare of the subjects suggest that his *dharma* was an ethical code aimed at fostering an attitude of social responsibility among the people. His policy of *dhamma* sought to make a strong case for the recognition of the dignity of man; it was a plea for the inculcation of virtuous behaviour transcending all social, religious, and cultural barriers. The concept of *dhamma* was very likely conditioned by the vastness of the empire, whose unity would be preserved by overcoming tensions generated by the existence of divergent social, religious, and cultural elements. Ashoka, therefore, laid emphasis on toleration, which was one of the basic principles of *dhamma*. By pleading for 'consideration towards slaves and servants, obedience to mother and father, generosity towards friends, acquaintances and relatives and towards priests and monks', Ashoka sought to promote harmony in the family and the community. Religious eclecticism occupies an important place in his rescripts. He claims to have honoured all sects as well as both ascetics and laymen with gifts and various forms of recognition. In the thirteenth year of his reign he donated two caves in the Barabar hills (Gaya district in Bihar) to the Ajivikas. In the eyes of the emperor, however, far more important than gifts and honours to different religious sects was their essential advancement. This, according to him, could be achieved if one desisted from extolling one's own sect and disparaging that of another. By not permitting the free expression of differences of opinion one may very often aggravate concealed tensions. But Ashoka's insistence on their suppression may be understood in the context of the need for unity in the empire.

Contrary to this emphasis on toleration, Ashoka banned festive meetings or gatherings, perhaps due to his fear of conflicts arising out of differences of opinion; only those sponsored by the state seem to have been permissible. The measure was in conformity with the strictly centralized administration of the Maurya empire. Popular meetings could be utilized to criticize and attack the king's new ideas. Their suppression therefore, seems to have been intended to stifle popular opposition.

In spite of his religious eclecticism Ashoka denounced all 'useless

ceremonies and sacrifices' held under the influence of superstition. He was particularly critical of such ceremonies as were performed during illness, at the birth or marriage of a child, or when setting out on a journey. Women were especially censured for observing religious and nonsensical rites. Ashoka's attack on ritual and sacrifice was probably intended to undermine the influence of the priest who presided over them and who benefited from people's trust in popular superstition.

Ashoka's *dhamma* also emphasized non-violence. Overwhelmed by the horror of the Kalinga war he is said to have renounced all further bloodshed, though it seems likely that his remorse over the war grew over the years and was not apparent immediately after. In one of his edicts he prohibits animal slaughter, though he is silent about the cow, presumably because it had not yet attained the sanctity which it came to acquire in later times. If this order applied only to the state sanctuaries of certain animals, as has been suggested, then Ashoka's measure would seem to be merely a continuation of the policy of Kautilya according to whom the killing of animals listed as inviolable was a punishable offence. It is more likely that Ashoka sought to prevent only the ritual sacrifice of animals and did not contemplate a general prohibition of animal slaughter; for he states that two peacocks and a deer were killed daily in the royal kitchen. This measure obviously hit the interests of the brahmanas, for whom animal sacrifice was a source of livelihood. In spite of his renunciation of war and his imposition of a check on the killing of animals for ritual purposes, Ashoka did not wholly abjure violence. In dealing with the troublesome forest tribes he clearly recognized the possibility of the use of violence.

The policy of *dhamma* included several measures relating to social welfare. After the tenth year of his reign when he visited Bodh Gaya, Ashoka inaugurated the system of royal tours (*dhammayatra*). Through these tours he came into contact with the masses, explained his policies to them, and also took interest in their general well-being. The edict at ... while on tour.