

ASOKA'S CONCEPT OF SOCIAL WELFARE

SUGATA DASGUPTA

In the following paper, the author throws light on Asoka's approach to Social Welfare and points out that he was more concerned with *Dharma* than with the acquisition of material benefits. It was he who first lit the torch of social services, and to him we turn as the pioneer thinker who first conceived and implemented a total, all-embracing purposeful plan for social welfare administration.

Mr. Dasgupta is Director of the Visva-Bharati Social Education Organisers' Training Centre, Sriniketan, and Reader in Social Work.

Philosophers have estimated that the life of an average Indian citizen was very widely influenced in the earlier stage of our history by the impact of ritualistic religion. Philosophy and religion had thus in the beginning of our history moulded and shaped all aspects of life of our people throughout this large subcontinent. Religion in India had persistently stressed on the duties of mankind towards each other. In the main Hindu scriptures one thus finds scattered all over, the innumerable duties of a king towards his subjects and of his subjects towards their ruler, of a father towards his children and of the children towards their father. Religion specially demanded of each person, on whom some others depended for social existence, heavy taxes in terms of undertaking social responsibilities.

The ancient Indian kings had therefore taken from time to time to religious act or to work of *Dharma* which in effect amounted to creation of services for social good and public welfare through state activities. From time to time great kings and compassionate rulers had thus built roads, provided rest houses and offered alms mainly as work of dutiful charity in order to fulfil one's own obligations of kingship. Although the subjects were the beneficiaries, in all these social welfare activities the people had little or no role to play in leading or directing these activities. It was for this reason once again that social services did not maintain their

continuity over the ages. The tide rose and fell according to the humours of the kings.

History provides unreliable data and scrappy materials with whose help one can hardly venture to write the full story of the social welfare activities which generations of rulers had undertaken in ancient India. Asoka's, rock and pillar edicts, however, provide plentiful sources of supply of data regarding the welfare work done by an outstanding emperor of this country. Yet, by his own admission, Asoka was not the first king to take to these activities. "I have also done," said Asoka in one of his rock declarations, "what my predecessors had done."

Asoka's Aim.—Devanam Piya Priyadarshi Raja, the beloved of the God and the prince charming king Asoka, left in his 14 rock edicts and seven main pillar edicts, a review of the main reforms he had initiated for the welfare of his subjects. If the aim of social work today is to help others to help themselves—Asoka's aim was to uplift mankind with the growth of *Dharma*.

Asoka followed two vital methods for organisation of his welfare services. One was offering wide instructions and proclamation through direct preaching by his men as well as through the cold prints of edicts so that people themselves did good to each other; secondly, he depended on promotion of welfare projects by public welfare activities through the agency of the state itself. Asoka's whole

administrative machinery was thus mobilised for offering welfare to his afflicted citizens through these two methods. In his immortal sermons which he wrote on the stones and rocks he annotated the principles for which his administrative system was carved out. He said, "My Purushas have been set over many people so that they will preach and disseminate informations, and Rajukas have been set over many hundred thousands of people. They too have been ordered to preach."

The two techniques of his organisation, edicts, sermons and direct activities by the state were used by this powerful emperor to enlist popular participation in the way of life which he recommended for his people and which he felt was pledged to lead them, his subjects, to the precious goal of *Dharma*. These two techniques could be successfully compared with the recent techniques of social education and rural welfare adopted by any progressive government.

There were, however, several vital differences in Asoka's approach to Social Welfare from that of the ours followed by a modern state which seeks to develop into a welfare society. First whatever little factual record we might have regarding the character of this development work, one thing is evident that as the modern social scientists demand there was no conscious attempt to link social work with productive venture or to throw the onus of its organisation on the people themselves. There was yet another important difference. Asoka's edicts and sermons called upon men to take to good work, that is the creation of welfare services for each other, solely for the attainment of *Dharma*, rather than for the acquisition of material benefits. His administrative system, however, made significant contribution towards the promotion of material welfare as well by the introduction of a series of state managed welfare projects.

Asoka similarly built hospitals, with qualified doctors, for both men and cattle.

Cultivation of medicinal herbs was encouraged and grant free award of land were made to the hospitals to ensure steady supply of cheap medicines. Asoka also imported medical plants from other neighbouring countries, whenever such plants were found beneficial for his ailing subjects. His medical officers who headed these hospitals were known as "Sthabiraputtas" and were very possibly awarded with rent free lands for their maintenance.

He planted Banian trees and grew Mango orchards. He dug wells at every eight *kroschos* on the travellers' path and built rest houses. He built sheds with supply of drinking water at different places. All these comforts, the shady trees, the rest houses and drinking water, were provided for the benefit not only of human beings but also for the welfare of animals.

Human Relations.—The improvement of human relations in family groups and among neighbourhood communities attracted the emperor's special attention. Asoka showered direct praise and royal patronage on those who took to such actions as he recommended for this specific purpose. "Meritorious is harkening to mother and father, meritorious is liberality to friends and acquaintances to relatives and slaves, Brahmanas and Sramans, meritorious is good behaviour with servants." This way Asoka pleaded with his subjects for offering personal respect to each other so that neither the family nor the unit of life in a neighbourhood could disintegrate through disharmony and maladjustment. To ensure emotional and social security for the old, Asoka particularly stressed the importance of giving due recognition to the old parents. In order to maintain sound relations on the farm, Asoka called for good behaviour to servants and slaves.

Asoka took great care to ensure that his each individual subject could lead a prosperous life through frugal living. He

encouraged the householders to plan family budgets by making an elaborate campaign for promotion of thrift. "Meritorious," he said, "is abstention from slaughter, meritorious is small expenditure and small savings." Small savings do not lead to inequity, yet help to build a reserve for every village home. Aimless expenditure in reckless abandon, has for the last two hundred years disorganised our rural homes and Asoka as the leader of the men of his realm called upon all the *Grihapatis* or family heads to economise their expenditure and build for a sound and adjusted family life in each home.

He also pleaded for a prohibition of cattle slaughter, particularly that of the milch cattle and warned that animal health could not be improved by merely providing hospitals for the cattle. Consequently, the emperor instructed his officers to import wholesome breed of animals even from beyond the high seas and encouraged castration of cattle for ensuring development of animal wealth which was then and which still remains to be the chief wealth of rural India..

In order to ensure that all religious communities in India would live in peace, Asoka pleaded for good behaviour and show of respect towards the Brahman although the emperor's first love was Buddhism. Asoka always believed in setting up personal examples before he wanted his subjects to follow a particular path. While he pleaded with his subjects that they should have happy personal relation with each other he thus himself endeavoured to have the best personal relation with his men. In his administrative system he made room for direct and immediate contact with all his subjects. "Whether I am in dining room, or in a female chamber, whether I am, in the inner apartment or on horse back, reporters could bring to my notice at any hour dispute or any inconvenience of people."

Message of Duty and Service.—Asoka desired that his message of duty and service should reach all parts of his large empire and be well implemented. He consequently set up a large paraphernalia of administration dipped in religious flavour for the purpose of social service administration. His *Dharmamahatras*, appointed on the thirteenth year of his reign, toured the various parts of his kingdom in order to detect cases of arbitrary imprisonment and unnecessary harassment in the districts. This they did over and above their normal duty which was to help the king in his task of securing both—material and spiritual happiness for all his subjects who were no less than his own children. His *Dharmamahatras* were to look to the welfare and happiness of the *Grihapatis* (householders) if they have been reduced to abject poverty. They were to give special attention to the helpless and the aged, to the infirm, the afflicted and the orphans. Rajukas, another class of officers who were appointed in the 20th year of his reign were charged to offer reward and punishment to his officers and others so that all could perform their duties with confidence and without fear. Rajukas were directed to make themselves acquainted with what gave happiness or pain to the people of the provinces so that Asoka's administration could offer them the required service. Asoka's officers were charged not with the rigors of a heartless administration but for ensuring justice where it was at naught, and to soften it with piety where it hit the subjects severely. Asoka's emphasis on offering material comforts to commoners by the organisation of such highly developed social services under the aegis of the state, which ensured care of the handicapped section of the population made him easily the first monarch to have found an empire based on principles of social welfare.

Asoka's officers not only cared after the handicapped but the king also directed the

women folk for not wasting their energy on much useless religious rites but prescribed certain forms of religious ceremony which combined material welfare with spiritual well-being as their product.

Asoka arranged for offering irrigational facilities and comforts for cattle and men in the rural areas. He set up a royal dairy and appointed a class of officers for cattle rearing. Different castes were assigned different flocks of cattle who had settled on various grades of graze land called *praja bhumis*. Asoka made attempts to reform the Penal Code in favour of his subjects.

Hoarding of Wealth.—Asoka stigmatised hoarding of wealth and deplored inequality of possessions in as much as he used to exhaust his royal treasury every year by giving away all his wealth to the poor, the needy and the meritorious. He set personal example in order to impress upon his rich subjects to give away their excess wealth to the poorer members of the society. Asoka observed strict austerity in his own home and kitchen before demanding that such austerity should be the order of the day for every home in the country. This austerity at royal household, this removal of all his surplus wealth every year created an atmosphere in the whole kingdom where the central mode of life would become service and not exploitation. Asoka took special care in selecting his officers who would supervise the working of the various laws and agencies spread in far-flung villages to generate services for the good of the people. He ensured that his officers were beyond corruption and petty jealousies and had set up high standards of their conduct and life. Asoka set out such officers and spread the softening influence of his administration of *Dharma*, by which he meant organisation of services for material welfare and spiritual well-being, not only in all parts of his state but also outside his frontiers and into the realms of other kings.

His design for curative services for men and animals, his programme of planting of useful trees were followed by many other neighbouring states and historians claim that the same were followed even in Greece.

The total emphasis of Asoka's reign was to relieve his subjects of the strains and stresses of day to day life with which we find ourselves handicapped today. The ryot is rack rented in modern India. There are no medical services worth the name to attend to him, his cattle are rickety, lifeless and of poor stock, his children are uncared for. The farmer's family budget is tragically upset today by wasteful extravagance of non-productive items. There is woeful absence of any savings for a rainy day. His old parents are lingering on like unwanted drags on the society! Continuous strifes and litigations resulting from disharmony, distrust and disrespect for each other are eating into the vitals of our nation. The beloved of the God and of the men, the prince charming, King Asoka cared for each one of these discomforts and had offered substantial redress.

In his reign the tenant paid only one-sixth of his produce as rent to the state, and in cases where special considerations were necessary Asoka reduced the rent to one-eighth only.

Asoka's social services did not desert even a criminal who had transgressed the rule of law. He allowed leave to prisoners on parole if their distressing family conditions required their presence at home, from time to time. His *Dharmamahamatras* inspected prisons in order to make money grants to the prisoners if some of them were encumbered with large families or even to release them if they were too poor. Asoka provided for three days of relief to the prisoners, on whom death sentences were passed, not as clemency or mercy but as something which was "rightful and extremely their own." These were the days when the convicts could lead a better

material and spiritual life by fasting, meeting their relations, meditating and giving away alms in order that they could leave this world with understanding and enter the new one with confidence.

His Achievements.—These two cardinal principles of recognition of the rights of the individual to the services of the state and of equality of treatment in the eyes of law and specially the latter which the caste system of Hindu India had previously and the Muslim rulers had succeedingly denied to the average citizen of this country are the two greatest achievements of Asoka as a paramount social worker of long ago.

Asoka saw that piecemeal help and services to a particular group of people at a particular time could not benefit mankind at large. He therefore not only wanted that his services should spread beyond his dominions and into the realms of others but wished that the same

may endure for a long time and that "My sons, grandsons and great grandsons may similarly follow me for the welfare of the whole world."

In our estimate of Asoka as a social worker we shall therefore make a major historical blunder if we merely look upon him as a social worker-king who reorganised the rural community life in India in his reign. Truly an international humanitarian and social philosopher of outstanding calibre, Asoka had lit the torch of social services in a world which he had just restored and which immediately after him lapsed into the maddening orgies of violence, savagery and early exploitation. Thus, although even before him the Indian kings had taken to welfare work among the masses, to him shall we turn as the pioneer thinker in this realm and as one who was the first to conceive and implement a total, all embracing purposeful plan for social welfare administration.