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A Reference to the Third Council in Asoka's Edicts ?

THE attention paid so far to those edicts of Asoka which make specific reference to Buddhism is somewhat meagre in contrast to his other edicts, with the possible exception of the Bhabru Edict. The lofty ideals and enlightened outlook evinced in the edicts have been of great interest to the student, and in his eagerness to treat the material before him as a whole, some aspects of the edicts have been overlooked. Events of great significance in Asoka's reign find no direct mention in the edicts, while others like the conquest of Kalinga are dwelt on at length as they have a direct bearing on his central theme *dharmavijaya*, "Conquest by Righteousness." Asoka's emphasis on his *dharma*, "Moral Law," and his "Conquest by Righteousness" has more or less thrown into insignificance the statements he makes in the Minor Rock Edicts of Brahmagiri I, Rūpnāth, Bhabru and Maski regarding his conversion to Buddhism and association with the Saṅgha etc., and his deep concern for the unity and general welfare of the Saṅgha which find expression in the Minor Pillar Edicts of Sārnāth, Kosambī and Sāncī. The Lumbinī and Niglivā Pillar Edicts too are essentially 'Buddhist' edicts while Rock Edict VIII mentions Asoka's visit to the Buddha's seat of enlightenment.

The central theme in the majority of the above edicts is the welfare of the Saṅgha. The opening lines of the Bhabru Rock Edict refer to Asoka's reverence for the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha :¹ "King Piyadassī of

1. *Asokan Text* : Piyadasi lājā Māgadhe saṅghaṃ abhivāde(tū)naṃ āhā apā-bādhatam ca phāsuvihālatam cā. Vidite ve bhaṃte āvatake hamā Budhasi Dhammasi Saṅghasiti gālave caṃ pasāde ca. E ke ci bhaṃte bhagavatā Budhena bhāsīte save se subhāsīte vā. E cu kho bhaṃte hamiyāye diseyā hevaṃ sadhamme cilaṅhitike hosatī ti alahāmi hakaṃ taṃ vatave.

Pali equivalent : Piyadassi rājā Māgadho saṅghaṃ abhivādītūna āha appābādhatāṃ ca phāsuvihāratāṃ ca. Vidito vo bhante yāvatako amhākaṃ Buddhasmiṃ Dhammasmiṃ Saṅghasmiṃ ti gāravo ca pasādo ca. Yaṃ kiṃ ci bhante bhagavatā Buddhena bhāsitaṃ sabbhaṃ taṃ subhāsitaṃ eva. Yaṃ ca kho bhante mayā ādiseyyaṃ evaṃ saddhammo ciraṅṅhitiko hessatī ti arahāmi ahaṃ taṃ vattave.

Magadha expresses his respectful greetings to the Saṅgha and enquires after their health, well-being and general comfort. Sirs, the extent of my reverence and devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha is known to you. Whatever, Sirs, has been declared by the Buddha, the Exalted One, has been well declared. And Sirs, what may be pointed out by me that the good Teaching shall endure for long, that I deserve to say."² He next proceeds to prescribe seven disquisitions of the Dhamma to be learned and retained in mind by monks and nuns and lay male and female disciples.³

The Minor Pillar Edicts of Sārnāth, Kosambī and Sāñcī are similar to one another as regards their contents. The unity of the Saṅgha and the punishment meted out to those who cause dissention in the Saṅgha find mention in them. The Sārnāth Edict, though a line or two are partially

2. More than anywhere else in the inscriptions, here in the Bhabru Edict, the term *dhamma* clearly refers to the Dhamma of the Buddha in contrast to the wider meaning that scholars are apt to assign to it. Other references to the Dhamma are not wanting in the edicts, (see R. Basak, *Asokan Inscriptions*, p. 158), but it is not intended here to enter into an unending controversy on the connotation of the term *dhamma* in the edicts. Suffice it to say that nowhere in the edicts does Asoka specifically mention any *dhamma* other than the Buddha's Dhamma and none of the principles of his "Moral Law" goes counter to the teachings of the Buddha. The so-called two senses in which he used the term *dhamma* are in effect one and the same.

3. The seven *dhammapaliyāyāni* (P. -pariyāyāni) of Asoka have been more or less satisfactorily identified. Vide T. W. Rhys Davids, *J.P.T.S.*, 1896, pp. 93 ff., *J.R.A.S.*, 1893, pp. 693 ff., Dharmananda Kosambi, *I.A.*, 1912, pp. 37 ff. Radhakumud Mookerji, *Asoka* pp. 117 ff., A. J. Edmunds, *J.R.A.S.*, 1913, p. 387, B. M. Barua, *J.R.A.S.*, 1915, pp. 809 ff., S. N. Mitra, *I.A.*, 1919, pp. 8 ff., D. R. Bhandarkar, *Asoka* pp. 85 ff., *J.D.L.* (Calcutta) XX, pp. 1 ff., Sylvain Lévi, *J.A.*, 7, pp. 475 ff., H. Oldenberg, *Vinaya Pīṭakam* I, pp. xl ff., Hultsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, I, pp. 172 ff. Also vide *U.C.R.*, I, 1, pp. 63 ff., VI, 4, pp. 229 ff.

The seven passages are :

- (i) *Vinayasamukhase* (P. *Vinayasamukkamsa*) "The Exaltation of the Discipline," identified as the Tuvaṭṭaka Sutta of Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 915 ff. I agree with Bhandarkar here (*Asoka*, pp. 87 ff.).
- (ii) *Āḷiyavasāni* (P. Ariyavaṃsāni) "The Noble Lineages," identified as the Ariyavaṃsa Sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya, A. II, 28 (S. N. Mitra).
- (iii) *Anāgatabhayāni*, "The Future Dangers," generally agreed as the Anāgatabhaya Sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya, A. III, 100 ff.
- (iv) *Muniḡāthā*, "The Stanzas on the Sage," identified as the Muni Sutta of Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 207 ff. (Rhys Davids).
- (v) *Moneyasūte* (P. Moneyyasutta), "The Discourse on the Saintly Life," identified as the Moneyya Sutta (i.e. Nālaka Sutta without the *vattluḡāthā*) of the Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 699 ff. (Vide, *U.C.R.* VI, 4)
- (vi) *Upatisapasīne* (P. Upatissapaṇho), "The Question of Upatissa," correctly identified as Sāriputta Sutta of Sutta Nipāta, Sn. 955 ff. by Dharmananda Kosambi.
- (vii) *Lāḡhulovāde musāvādam adhigicya* (P. Rāhulovādo musāvādam adhigacca) identified as the Ambalaṭṭhikā Rāhulovāda Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya, M.I. 414 ff. (Rhys Davids).

ASOKA'S EDICTS AND THIRD COUNCIL

defaced, says :⁴ “ In Pāṭa(liputta) (It shall not be possible) for any one to divide the Saṅgha. Whosoever monk or nun, will divide the Saṅgha shall be made to wear white garments and compelled to live in a non-monastic dwelling. Thus this command shall be communicated to the Saṅgha of both monks and of nuns.” Next he instructs as to where the Edict should be posted and enjoins the Mahāmātras to enforce the rule of expelling the schismatics. The Kosambī Edict, though brief, in essence contains the same injunction :⁵ “ The Mahāmattas of Kosambī (are commanded) (The Saṅgha) has been united . . . is not to be found among the Saṅgha Whosoever monk or nun will divide the Saṅgha shall be made to wear white garments and compelled to live in a non-monastic dwelling.” The Sāñcī version goes one step further in describing the lasting effects of Asoka's unification of the Saṅgha. He says :⁶ “ The Saṅgha of monks and of nuns has been united to remain so to the time of my children and grandchildren and as long as the sun and the moon endure. Whosoever monk or nun will divide the Saṅgha shall be made to wear white garments and compelled to live in a non-monastic dwelling. What is my intention ? It is that the Saṅgha, united, shall endure for long.”

In the Lumbinī Pillar Edict Asoka refers to his visit in the twentieth year of his consecration, to the Buddha's birthplace where he constructed

4. *Asokan Text* : Pāṭa(lipute) . . . (na) ye kena pi saṅghe bhetave. E caṃ kho (bhikkhū vā bhikkhunī vā) saṅghaṃ bhākhati (se) odātāni dussāni samnamdhāpayiyā anāvāsasi āvāsāyīve. Hevaṃ iyaṃ sāsane bhikkhusaṅghasi ca bhikkhunīsaṅghasi ca vimna-payitāyīve, etc.

Pāli equivalent : Pāṭaliputte . . . na yena kena pi saṅgho bhetabbo. Yo ca kho bhikkhu vā bhikkhunī vā saṅghaṃ bhecchati so odātāni dussāni sannaddhāpayitvā anāvāsamhi āvāsetabbo. Evam idaṃ sāsanaṃ bhikkhusaṅghassa ca bhikkhunīsaṅghassa ca viññāpetabbaṃ.

5. *Asokan Text* : Kosambiyam mahā(mā)ta (sa)ma(ge) kaṭe . . . Saṅghasi na lahiye . . . (saṅghaṃ bhākhati) bhikhu vā bhikkhuni vā (se)pi odātāni dussāni (saṃ)namdhāpayītu a(nāvā)sasi (āvā)sayīve.

Pāli equivalent : Kosambiyam mahāmattā . . . samaggo kato Saṅghasmiṃ na labbhā . . . saṅghaṃ bhecchati bhikkhu vā bhikkhunī vā sopi odātāni dussāni sannaddhāpetvā anāvāsamhi āvāsetabbo.

6. *Asokan Text* : (Saṃ)ghe (sa)mage kaṭe. (Bhi)khūnaṃ ca bhi(khūnī)naṃ cā ti (pu)tapa(po)tike caṃ(da)ma(sū)ri(yike). Ye saṅghaṃ bhākhati bhikhu vā bhikkhuni vā odātāni du(sāni) samam(dhāpa)ṃyitu anā(vā)sasi vā(sā)petāyīve. Ichā hi me kiṃ ti, saṅghe samagge cīlatthitiko siyā ti.

Pāli equivalent : Saṅgho samaggo kato, bhikkhūnaṃ ca bhikkhunīnaṃ cā ti, āputta-paputtikaṃ candimasuriyakaṃ. Yo saṅghaṃ bhecchati bhikkhu vā bhikkhunī vā (so) odātāni dussāni sannaddhāpayitvā anāvāsamhi vāsāpetabbo. Kā hi me icchā ti, saṅgho samaggo cīratthitiko siyā ti.

a stone monument⁷ and set up a pillar and exempted the village of taxes.⁸ In the Niglivā Minor Pillar Edict reference is made to his having rebuilt in his fourteenth year after consecration, the *thūpa* to Konāgamana Buddha, and of a second visit paid in the twentieth year when he set up a pillar there.⁹ He also undertook a pilgrimage to the *sambodhi* "the place of enlightenment of the Buddha," in the tenth year of his consecration.¹⁰

These and a fair proportion of Asoka's other edicts bear testimony to his direct connections with Buddhism. The edicts of Brahmagiri (No. 1) Rūpnāth and Maski refer to his having been a lay-disciple of the Buddha for over two and a half years, and that he had not made much progress for one whole year and after he has had closer associations with the Saṅgha for a period of over one year i.e. out of the full period of two and a half years as an *upāsaka*, he began making great progress in the Dhamma.¹¹ Asoka's words are quite clear with regard to the period he had *saṅgham upayāte*, "gone to the Saṅgha (for guidance)," though the edicts are often mistranslated as Asoka having entered the Saṅgha either as a monk or as a *bhikkhugatika*. In doing so, too much reliance has been placed on a state-

7. The word used is *silāvigaḍabhi* generally explained as *silā-vikṛtabhitti* but a more plausible explanation is given by R. Basak, *Asokan Inscriptions* p. 150, that it stands for *silā-āvira-gardabhi*, "a she-ass clearly carved out of stone," serving as a capital to the pillar. He supports his explanation on the testimony of Hiuen Tsang who refers to this pillar as having a horse capital and that he may have mistaken the *gardabhi* for a horse.

8. *Asokan Text* : Devāna piyena Piyadasina lājina visativasābhisitena atana āgāca mahiyite, hida Budhe jāte Sakyamunī ti ; silāvigaḍabhi eā kalāpita silāthabhe ca usapāpito : hida bhagavaṃ jāte ti Lumminigāme ubalike kaṭe aṭṭhabhāgiye ca.

Pali equivalent : Devānampiyena Piyadassinā rājinā visativassābhisittena attanā āgama mahiyitaṃ idha Buddhō jāto Sakyamunī ti silāvigaḍabhi (?) ca kārapitā silāthambho ca usapāpito idha Bhagavā jāto ti. Lumbinīgāmo ubhaliko kato aṭṭhabhāgiko ca.

9. *Asokan Text* : Devānaṃ piyena Piyadassinā lājina codasavasā(bhisitena) Budhasa Konāgamanasa thuve dutiyaṃ vadhite. (Visativa)sābhisitena ca atana āgāca mahiyite (silāthabhe ca usapāpito).

Pali equivalent : Devānampiyena Piyadassinā rājinā cuddasavassābhisittena Buddhassa Konāgamanassa thūpo dutiyaṃ vadhito. Visativassābhisittena ca attanā āgama mahiyito, silāthambho ca usapāpito.

10. *Asokan Text* : Devānaṃ piye Piyadasi lājā dasavasābhisite saṃtaṃ nikkhamithā sambodhi, R.E. VIII (Kalsi Version).

Pali equivalent : Devānampiyo Piyadassī rājā dasavassābhisitto santo nikkhamittha sambodhiṃ.

11. *Vide* Brahmagiri Rock Edict I, Adhikāni adhātīyāni vasūni ya hakaṃ upāsake, no tu kho bādhaṃ pakamte husaṃ ekaṃ savacharaṃ. Sātīreke tu kho saṃvacharaṃ yaṃ mayā saṃghe upayāte bādhaṃ ca pakamte. (cp. Rūpnāth and Maski Edicts which record the same statement in slightly different words. The latter has yaṃ aṃ sumi Budhasake for ya hakaṃ upāsake and saṃghaṃ upagate for saṃghaṃ upayāte). "It is over two and a half years since I have been a lay-disciple (of the Buddha), but I did not make great progress for one year. It is over a year since I have gone up to the Saṅgha (for guidance) and have made great progress." The variant in the Maski Edict means : "I have been a follower of Buddha, the Sakyan . . . gone up to the Saṅgha."

ASOKA'S EDICTS AND THIRD COUNCIL

ment made by I-tsing¹² that he had seen Asoka represented in the garb of a monk in sculpture, but "the supposed representations of Asoka in the Sanchi sculptures show him dressed like a king and surrounded with all the paraphernalia of a king."¹³ However, Mookerji's interpretation that Asoka became a *bhikkhugatika*¹⁴ can hardly be justified. Later on at p. 109 he reiterates the point but adds a more plausible explanation equating it to his becoming a *sāsanadāyāda* "an heir of the Dispensation," as the Pali sources¹⁵ would have it, though it certainly does not imply a formal change in the status of the disciple unlike in the case of becoming a *bhikkhugatika*. The phrases *saṅghe upayīte*, *saṅgha upete*, *saṅghaṃ upagāte* in the three edicts are better interpreted along with the reference made in the Pali records that Asoka studied the teaching of the Buddha under Moggaliputta Tissa.¹⁶ The edicts merely state that he had closer associations with the Saṅgha for over a year though he had nominally been an *upāsaka* for two and a half years. The closer association leading to "greater progress" may have consisted of his studying the Dhamma under the Saṅgha and evidently it is as a result of the study of the Dhamma that he was inspired by the every day ethics of Buddhism which he in turn inculcated in his edicts, all of which were published after his conversion to Buddhism.¹⁷ This is supported by B. M. Barua¹⁸ who rejects the views of Bühler and Kern that Asoka for the time being became a monk giving up the kingship and of Vincent Smith that while remaining to be king he assumed monastic vows. He also criticises Kern for taking the phrase *saṅghaṃ upagāte* to mean a state visit to the Saṅgha to make a public profession of his faith, but states that Asoka lived among the monks as an *upāsaka*.¹⁹

All these references are of great significance in discussing Asoka's personal religion and the Dhamma he advocated and promulgated among his subjects. This subject has been comprehensively dealt with from several angles making use of the same evidence sometimes to establish divergent points of view. Whatever conclusion one arrives at, two facts have to be kept in mind, firstly, that nothing in the edicts goes counter to the teaching of the Buddha and secondly, that all his edicts were published after his conversion to Buddhism. The most recent addition to the literature on Asoka's *dharma* is made by R. Basak in his *Asokan Inscriptions* (already

12. Takakusu, translation, p. 73.

13. Radhakumud Mookerji, *Asoka* p. 23, n. 1.

14. *ibid.*

15. Smp. I, 50.

16. See note 26 page 68.

17. *Vide* Mookerji, *Asoka*, p. 37 for chronology of Asoka's reign.

18. B. M. Barua, *Inscriptions of Asoka* II, 334 ff.

19. The reader is referred to Barua's conclusion (*ibid.* p. 337.)

referred to) pp. xxii ff. where he establishes that it is the Buddha's Dhamma. In this connexion, however, it is interesting to note that offences punishable by law are not mentioned in the edicts and that it is only the avoidance of misdeeds that lie outside the scope of the common law and the inculcation of good deeds which cannot be enforced by law that are recommended.

Besides all this, a reference to an event of far greater significance is to be seen in the edicts cited. This has so far escaped the attention of Asokan scholars as the event has not been specifically mentioned. Barua²⁰ very nearly mentions it but hazards no inference. What has been omitted from the edicts is adequately supplemented by the Ceylon Chronicles and the *Samantapāsādikā*. Scholars are emphatic that the Third Buddhist Council held at Asokārāma in Pāṭaliputta finds no mention in the edicts and some have even gone to the extent of denying its historicity while others grudgingly concede that there was a Council under Moggaliputta Tissa and that it was a mere party-meeting. By rejecting the testimony of the Pali sources whose tradition was not very far removed from the dates of the three Councils and accepting the confused accounts of the Sanskrit Schools preserved in translation in Tibetan and Chinese and also accepting the travellers' tales of Fa-Hien and Hiuen-Tsang to whom the living tradition was no longer available, in preference to the Pali accounts, attempts have been made to indentify the Second and Third Councils.²¹ The charge that the Pāṭaliputta Council was only a party-meeting can be summarily dismissed as the only form of Buddhism that the Pali accounts refer to and perhaps Asoka patronised is the Theravāda, while the Chinese accounts, with the exception of *Sudarśana-vibhāṣā Vinaya* (transl. of *Smp.*), confuse Kālāsoka with Asoka. Although the Mahāsaṅghika split is recorded as having taken place after the Second Council no reference whatever is made to other Schools of Buddhism in connexion with the accounts of the Third Council. The Saṅgha is said to have been cleansed of the *titthiyā*, "heretics," who are enumerated at *Smp.* I, 53. The *Kathāvatthu*, however, which was finalised at the Council presupposes the existence of other Schools when it refutes their views. Seventeen Schools, excluding the parent Theravāda, are said to have arisen in the second century after the Buddha,²² yet it is strange that the accounts carefully avoid mentioning them in connexion with the interruption of the *uposatha*, *saṅghakamma*, *ganakamma* and so forth, which resulted in the disunity of the Saṅgha (see below). Apparently the only form of Buddhism that the accounts refer to is the Theravāda and it is the

20. *Ibid.* II, 378 ff.

21. *Vide* Geiger, *Mhv.* transl. pp. lix ff. for a clear analysis of the confusion.

22. *Mhv.* V, 11.

ASOKA'S EDICTS AND THIRD COUNCIL

Theravāda that was established in the *paccantimajanapadā* "the border districts," including Ceylon. Further, the *dhammapariyāyā* mentioned in the Bhabru Edict are passages that can be identified with Pali texts²³ and evidently they are not to be taken as forming parts of the Sanskrit Canon. The suggestion that they formed parts of a Prakrit Canon is based on the fact that the names of the Suttas are given in the local Prakrit in use in and around Bairat in Asoka's day. Hence, as far as Asoka was concerned he was an adherent of the Theravāda.

Before proceeding any further it would be useful at this stage to briefly recount the narrative from the Pali sources. The most comprehensive account of the Third Council in Pali is found in the introductory chapter or *bāhiraṇidāna* of the *Samantapāsādikā*, the Vinaya Commentary of Buddhaghosa, though both the chronicles *Dīpavaṃsa* and *Mahāvāṃsa* deal with it to a satisfactory extent. It would suffice to give the *Smp.* version here, which runs :—²⁴ In this manner there arose great gain and honour to the Dispensation. The heretics whose gain and honour had dwindled to the extent of their failing to obtain even their food and raiment, gained admission into the Order in the Dispensation in their eagerness for gain and honour, and each propounded his speculative theory claiming it to be the Dhamma and the Vinaya. And those who failed to gain admission to the Order, themselves shaved off their hair, and wearing yellow robes wandered about in monasteries intruding at the *uposatha* and *pavāraṇa* ceremonies and at formal acts of the Order and of the Chapter. The monks did not perform the *uposatha* ceremony in their company. Thereupon the Elder Moggaliputta Tissa handed over the leadership of the Chapter to the Elder Mahinda, thinking, "Now this dispute has arisen, it will soon be aggravated, and it is not possible to settle it living in their midst," and wishing to abide at peace as he was wont to, he retired to the hill near Ahogaṅgā. And in spite of the heretics being subjected to censure by the Order of monks in respect of the Dhamma and the Vinaya and the Teaching of the Master, they gave rise to diverse forms of upheavals, stains and thorns in the Dispensation, as they did not conform to the principles laid down in accordance with the Dhamma and the Vinaya. Some of them tended the sacrificial fire, some subjected themselves to the heat of the five fires, some worshipped the sun following its movements in the sky, while others made a determined effort to destroy the Dhamma and the Vinaya. At that time the Order of monks held neither the *uposatha* nor the *pavāraṇa* with them.

23. See p. 62, n. 3 above.

24. *Smp.* I, 53 ff.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

The *uposatha* at Asokârāma was interrupted for seven years. They informed the King too of this matter. The King commanded a minister to go to the monastery and settle the dispute and revive the *uposatha*.

Next follows the description of the minister's abortive attempt at uniting the Saṅgha, by beheading the monks. The King was greatly upset that he was responsible for the killing and it was Moggaliputta Tissa who was with great difficulty persuaded to come back to Pāṭaliputta, who finally reassured the King that he was not responsible for the minister's misguided act. The narrative continues :—²⁵ In this manner the Elder reassured the King : and living there in the King's park itself, for seven days he instructed the King on the Teaching.²⁶ On the seventh day, the King had the Order of monks assembled at Asokârāma, and having had an enclosure of screens put round, he sat within that enclosure, and separately grouping together monks who held divergent views, and summoning each group of monks asked, "What teaching did the Perfectly Enlightened One declare ?" Then the eternalists replied that he was an eternalist. The qualified eternalists, the propounders of the theory of finiteness and infinitude, the eel-wrigglers, casuists, those who held theories of conscious existence, non-conscious existence, neither conscious nor non-conscious existence, annihilationists and those who professed *nibbāna* of this life, replied (in accordance with their views). Since the King had already studied the Teaching he realised that they were not monks but heretics belonging to foreign sects ; and giving them white clothes he disrobed them. They numbered sixty thousand in all. He next summoned the remaining monks and asked, "What teaching did the Perfectly Enlightened One declare ?"

"Great King, he was an exponent of the analytical doctrine."

When it was said thus, the King asked the Elder, "Did the Perfectly Enlightened One expound the analytical doctrine ?"

"Yes, Great King."

Thereupon the King said, "Sir, the Dispensation is now pure ; let the Order of monks hold the *uposatha* ;"²⁷ and giving them his protection he entered the city. *The Order, united in perfect harmony (samaggo), assembled and held the uposatha.*²⁸

25. Snp. I, 60 ff.

26. The word used is *samayaṃ* 'philosophy' or 'system of philosophy.' But Mhv. V, 265 is more specific in referring to it as *sambuddhasamayaṃ* 'the Teaching of the Perfectly Enlightened One,' while Dpv. VII, 53, merely uses the word *sāsana* 'the Message.'

27. The *uposatha* is an essential feature in the unity of the Saṅgha. Hence the great emphasis laid on it.

28. Next it mentions that Moggaliputta Tissa recited the *Kathāvatthu* refuting heretical views and held the Third Council rehearsing the Dhamma and the Vinaya and cleansing the Dispensation of all stains.

ASOKA'S EDICTS AND THIRD COUNCIL

The *Dīpavaṃsa* gives two versions of the account of the Council in one and the same chapter at *Dpv.* VII, 35-43 and 44-59. The stanza *Dpv.* VII, 53 succinctly points out the precise rôle of the King in uniting the Saṅgha and bringing about its purification. It runs :—

*Therassa santike rājā uggahetvāna sāsanaṃ
theyyasaṃvāsa-bhikkhuno nāsesi liṅganāsanaṃ.*

“The King who had studied the Teaching under the Elder destroyed the outward emblems of those who had furtively entered the Order.”²⁹

The parallel account in the *Mahāvāṃsa* commences at *Mhv.* V, 228 and proceeds to the end of the chapter with no significant variations from the *Smp.* version. The manner of disrobing the heretics is not so graphically described and clearly stated in *Mhv.* as at *Dpv.* VII, 53 and *Smp.* I, 61. The stanza *Mhv.* V, 270 merely states, “The King had all those heretics disrobed, and all those who were disrobed numbered sixty thousand.” The Saṅgha then being united, performed the *uposatha* as *Mhv.* V, 274 states : *Saṅgho samaggo hutvāna tadākāsi uposathaṃ.*

In the foregoing data we have two independent sources, the edicts and the Pali accounts of the Third Council to go by. The common factors of both sources are

- (1) the uniting of the Saṅgha,
- (2) the disrobing of heretics.

The Pali sources confirm Asoka's rôle in bringing about unity in the Saṅgha. While the edicts confine themselves to these two events, the Pali accounts go much further and continue the narrative right up to the despatch of missionaries to the border districts. The legitimate inference from this silence of Asoka is that he was interested in only making known the things he was directly responsible for. The Council was held by Moggaliputta and as such Asoka cannot be expected to claim any credit for it. Thus the repeated mention of his bringing about unity in the Saṅgha and the reference to the punishment to be meted out to schismatics eloquently speak of his contribution towards the stabilisation of the Sāsana while the silence in the edicts regarding the Council is a still more eloquent tribute to the actual

²⁹. The outward emblems of the *theyyasaṃvāsakā* ‘those who live clandestinely with the bhikkhus’ is the yellow robe. They were disrobed and given white garments as the *Smp.* and edicts state.

UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

author of the Council. With all the evidence available before us, there is no justification for denying the historicity of the Council. According to the Pali sources, he united the Saṅgha by disrobing the heretics and giving them white clothes, or in other words, by removing the outward emblems of a monk. This is exactly what he did as may be inferred from the edicts. Asoka's command that whosoever disrupts the Saṅgha shall be made to don white clothes and be compelled to live in a dwelling other than a monastery is a mere reminiscence of what he actually did at the time he united the Saṅgha, and there is no justification at all to construe that this statement was made in a vacuum, thinking of a future eventuality only, specially when it is followed by the reference to his having united the Saṅgha in the previous sentence. All events and statements are to be viewed against their background and the only possible background one can conceive of is the unsettled conditions of the Sāsana during the years prior to the Council and the Council itself is the logical conclusion resulting in the unification of the Saṅgha. The dissention in the Saṅgha was brought about by the *theyyasaṃvāsaka* heretics who clandestinely lived among the monks; and Asoka's warning is against the repetition of such activity which will merit the same punishment as he had meted out earlier. With all the evidence from Pali sources and circumstantial evidence it would be highly unhistorical to suggest that Asoka was thinking of a punishment he would mete out at a future date and that the statement has no reference to anything he actually did. The fact that most of the edicts are dated (from the year of Asoka's consecration), helps us to determine that the Council was anterior to the edicts.³⁰ The unification of the Saṅgha mentioned in three of the edicts is a matter of very great significance in the eyes of Asoka and it is meaningless to speak of uniting the Saṅgha without there being any disunity. It is here that the Pali accounts fill the gap left in the edicts, as the general background which brought about chaos in the Order is graphically described in them. Further, when a reigning monarch, a *cakkavatti rājā*, takes a step of this nature resulting in far-reaching consequences it is to be inferred that the necessary setting has been provided. He would not have acted unless the situation demanded his intervention. It is to be expected that the purification of the Saṅgha was conducted with all ceremony and formality appropriate for the occasion. The opportunity was provided to the King at the assembly of monks prior to the actual recital at the Council. Asoka cannot be expected to decide for himself who the real bhikkhus and who the heretics were. He too did not consider himself competent to judge who the upholders of the doctrine were and who were not. He needed the help

30. 218 A. B. works out to 265 B.C. taking 483 B.C. as the date of the parimibbāna.

of the monks to decide this. It was very necessary that he should receive instruction on the Dhamma to carry out this task. His earlier ignorance of the Dhamma is to be inferred from the statement in *Smp.* that Moggaliputta instructed the King on the Teaching and that he was able to judge the heretics as a result of this. His utter dependence on Moggaliputta is reflected in his having to look to him for advice even when the true bhikkhus reply that the Buddha was a Vibhajjavādi. The phrase *saṅgham upagata* in the edicts too definitely expresses Asoka's earlier ignorance of the Dhamma and the two things to my mind are one and the same, as mentioned earlier. With the advice of the bhikkhus he was now in a position to judge the heretics : and the purification of the Saṅgha was a thing that needed his immediate attention. There should be a suitable occasion for this and there is no better opportunity for it than at a formal meeting of the members of the Saṅgha, and this was at the time of the Third Council. The Council was held in his imperial capital of Pāṭaliputta, in his own monastery of Asokārāma, and it is inconceivable to think of a Council without his being associated with it and needless to say that it had his blessing and patronage.

The Theras who conducted the Council do not claim to have united the Saṅgha. As in the edicts, in the Pali sources too, the King is responsible for uniting the Saṅgha³¹ and the Theras next proceed with the affairs of the Council. The manner in which Asoka brought about the purification of the Saṅgha has already been mentioned. Here, too, the Theras do not claim any responsibility for disrobing the heretics. All temporal authority was vested in the King and this has confirmation in a statement attributed to Ajātasattu in connexion with the First Council, *mayham āṇācakkam tuyham dhammacakkam* " mine is the wheel of authority and yours the wheel of the dhamma ; " (*Smp.* I, 10). The bhikkhus would not undertake the task of disrobing individuals though they could pass a *pabbājaniya kamma* " a formal act of excommunication." The assistance and support of the temporal authority was required in carrying out the actual expulsion and in this case it was Asoka who came to the assistance of the Saṅgha. When Asoka says in his edicts that those who bring about dissension in the Order

31. At *Smp.* I. 61 the King says, *Suddham dāmi bhante sāsanam, karotu bhikkhvesaṅgho uposatham.* "Sirs, the Dispensation is now pure, may the Order of monks hold the *uposatha.*" It adds later, *samaggo saṅgho sammūpatiteā uposatham akāsi.* "The Order assembled, and united, held the *uposatha.* Mhv. V. 273 ff. too states :

Saṅgho visodhito yasmā, tasmā saṅgho uposatham
karotu bhante " iccevaṃ vatvā therassa bhūpati
saṅghassa rakkham datvāna nagaram pāvisi subham
saṅgho samaggo hutvāna tadākāsi uposatham.

(" Since the Order has been purified, may the Order, Sirs, hold the *uposatha* ; " saying thus to the Elder, the King gave protection to the Order and entered his beautiful city. The Order being united (in harmony), then held the *uposatha*).

shall be disrobed, he does not give expression to a new idea that has occurred to him. His rôle in the historic unification of the Saṅgha at Pāṭaliputta, participating in the preliminary proceedings of the Council, is still fresh in his memory and this warning is intended to serve as a deterrent to individuals prone to *saṅghabheda* at a future date. To this extent it may be said that the edicts refer to the Council and it is like throwing away the baby with the bath as Geiger puts it, if we persist in rejecting the historicity of the Council, paying scant respect to the general trustworthiness of the tradition embodied in *Smp.* and the chronicles, and that too, in spite of the corroborative evidence from the edicts which has hitherto been neglected. The edicts certainly do not refer to conditions obtaining at the time they were issued though one may be tempted to imagine so, for the Council was held long before these edicts were issued³² and there is nothing to indicate that the chaos that prevailed prior to the Council had again returned while the Sāsana was making rapid progress throughout the Empire and beyond, and while Asoka who meted out such severe punishment to the miscreants was still reigning. Hence the Pali accounts are quite clear as regards Asoka's rôle at the Council while they are corroborated by the evidence from the edicts. His edicts too, true to his sense of propriety in not claiming for himself what he was not directly responsible for make no reference to the part played by the Elders whose work really began when Asoka had attended to the all-important task of purifying the Saṅgha. The Council alone is not mentioned specifically though everything that transpired preparatory to the Council is mentioned. There is every reason to believe that the statement *saṅghe samage kaṭe*³³ is an allusion to Asoka's work prior to the Council and none other ; and the argument from silence, which itself is invalid, to deny the historicity of the Council is no longer tenable when the fresh evidence thus available from the edicts is used along with the traditional accounts of the Council in the Pali sources.³⁴

N. A. JAYAWICKRAMA

32. *Vide* Radhakumud Mookerji, *Asoka*, p. 37.

33. The reader is referred to Dr. B. M. Barua's *Inscriptions of Asoka*, II, 378 ff. where he has given comprehensive notes and observations on the Schism Pillar Edict. He concludes : "By the consensus of opinion the text of Asoka's ordinance confirms the authenticity of the Pali tradition concerning the third or Pāṭaliputra Council. Strictly speaking it throws some light on the truth behind the tradition concerning the *samāgama* or assembly of the community of *bhikkhus* which preceded the Council."

34. While the edicts go up to this point, the discovery of the caskets containing the relics of the missionaries who were despatched after the Council gives us further data in support of the Council.