

NMML OCCASIONAL PAPER
HISTORY AND SOCIETY
New Series
88

Text and Context
**Understanding the Ashokan Inscriptions and the
Archaeological Landscape of Bairat**

Meenakshi Vashisth

*Research Coordinator at Sahapedia, an open online encyclopaedic resource for arts, cultures, histories
and heritage of India; Current paper is a part of her M Phil research*



Nehru Memorial Museum and Library 2017

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Published by

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
Teen Murti House
New Delhi-110011
e-mail: director.nmml@gov.in
ISBN: 978-93-84793-03-6

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Understanding the Ashokan Inscriptions and the Archaeological
Landscape of Bairat*
Meenakshi Vashisth

Abstract

Bairat region falls within the present political boundaries of district Jaipur in the state of Rajasthan. Considering that Bairat has yielded two Ashokan Inscriptions—the Calcutta-Bairat Rock Edict and the Minor Rock Edict I—it must have formed a region of importance in Mauryan times. This may well be why Emperor Ashoka chose it as one of the places for the spreading of his messages. This paper is an attempt to study the texts of these Ashokan inscriptions by placing them within their geographical and archaeological landscapes since the selection of places for putting up the royal messages was not arbitrary. So, the language, script, and content of the edicts with their geo-cultural settings are studied in relation with each other. Analysing the archaeological importance and understanding the history and cultural continuity of Bairat region through its material remains while examining and exploring references from textual sources is its focus.

Introduction

It was the year 1837 when the efforts of James Prinsep, building on the work of a number of other scholars culminated in the deciphering of the forgotten Ashokan Brahmi script and the very next year, the Kharoshthi script was deciphered. It took some time to come to the conclusion that the inscribed rocks and boulders as reported to the Asiatic Society of Bengal from almost all the regions of the subcontinent in the course of the nineteenth century, were of the Mauryan king Ashoka. Since then, these ‘edicts’¹ of the Mauryan ruler have played an important role in reconstructing the histories of the past they are associated with. The inscribed messages became

* Paper presented at a conference titled ‘Histories of Rajasthan: Fresh Approaches’, held at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 14-15 October 2015.

¹ I am using the most commonly used word ‘edict’ for the inscriptions of Ashoka. Patrick Olivelle has argued that the Oxford English Dictionary defines edict as ‘an order issued by the sovereign to his subjects; an ordinance or proclamation having the force of law.’ But in the case of the two Minor Rock Edicts, all the Pillar Edicts, four of the Rock Edicts (3, 5, 6, and 14), the two Separate Edicts and the Minor Pillar Edicts dealing with the Sangha, which Olivelle describes as the first-person texts—while some of them do carry imperial orders, most do not. It thus, can hardly be seen as the proclamations having the force of law. Olivelle, Leoshko, Ray (2012), p. 348.

the reference point in tracing back the history of the subcontinent and of the regions which yielded these important sources of information to study the bigger picture. Since the 1830s, the texts of these inscriptions and the materials they are inscribed on became the lens to analyse the authority, power, ideology, administration and the nature of the empire of the Mauryan emperor. Simultaneously, through the study of the locations or the geography of the inscription sites, scholars have tried to see the network of these inscriptions as indicating the framework and extent of the empire as also indicators of various trade routes of Ancient India.

The inscriptions of Ashoka are divided into various categories which occur with minor variations in different places. On the basis of the type of material on which these are inscribed, there are two main categories: Rock Edicts and Pillar Edicts. On the basis of the text of the inscriptions these are categorized into Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, Pillar Edicts, Separate Rock Edicts, Schism Edicts, Diverse Edicts, and Cave inscriptions. Not just that, the texts of some of the inscriptions also show the different ways in which these messages of the King were to be promulgated. Minor Rock Edict I was meant to be inscribed, which is clear with the term *likhita*, appearing in the texts, on rocks at clearly defined places. On the other hand, Minor Rock Edict II, appearing alongside Minor Rock Edict I in at least five instances solely in the south, never speaks of *likhita* but of oral instruction with the terms *ānapayati* or *niveṣayati* appearing in the text, indicating that these were read aloud and explained.² Similarly, in the Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict Ashoka states, while talking to the elders of the Buddhist sangha on the Bijak-ki-Pahari, *eteni bhaṁte imāmlikhā[pa]yāmi abhipretam me jānaṁtū ti* which means ‘...for the following purpose, Sirs, am I causing this to be written, in order that they may know my intention.’ This portion of the inscription might be only the part of the ‘cover letter’³ of the entire message which Ashoka wanted to be inscribed. But this clearly shows that there were different ways of conveying the royal messages to the people and the way they were intended to be conveyed.

The story of Ashoka began to take shape in the form of a detailed narrative with the work of Vincent Smith’s biography of Ashoka in 1901 and since then, the texts and ideology behind them are a matter of debates and the process is still on. As Robert Lingat has argued ‘there are in

² Falk (2006), p. 57

³ Olivelle (2012), p. 159

reality two Ashok as—the historical Ashoka whom we know through his inscriptions, and the legendary Ashoka, who is known to us through texts of diverse origins—Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese and Tibetan.⁴ He is entangled with all sorts of stories but not giving any biographical information about himself. Similarly, in later texts where he figures prominently, the information about him is not as satisfactory as historians would have liked it to be. For instance, the name of his mother varies from text to text. But scholars have tried to extract all sorts of information from the edicts of Ashoka such as: the nature of the Mauryan ruler who made his presence felt all over his empire through his public messages and proclamations; the nature of his administration as also his political authority not just in terms of controlling the lives of his subjects but making use of particular places which were central in the lives of the people; or the presence of communication networks in the areas where Ashoka's edicts were inscribed; and a very long debate on the issue of Dhamma as reflected in Ashokan inscriptions.

At the same time, a great deal has emerged by placing a particular edict within its regional and local archaeological context. Scholars such as Romila Thapar, Dilip K. Chakrabarti, and Harry Falk have tried to explain that these inscriptions were deliberately placed in their specific geo-cultural contexts. Alexander Cunningham was the first who presented the findings especially the geographical locations of the edicts as a separate portion in his work *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum I*. He personally visited most of the pillars and caves, as well as the rocks of the Ashokan inscriptions. In part I of this volume he has given a general account of the sites, dimension, and condition of all the inscribed rocks, caves, and pillars, which is illustrated by a map showing the exact position of each inscription. Cunningham tried to collect all material in one volume with his final observations of his findings. A Similar exercise was carried out by E. Hultzsch in the 1920s in the form of his *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*. He facilitated his work with the new discoveries of Ashokan inscriptions like the Maski Rock inscription, inscriptions of the Mysore State⁵, etc. and improved on translations of Ashokan inscriptions, which is considered as a widely accepted translated version of this category. Hultzsch has also provided geographical locations of these inscriptions including, description of the sites, and the material on which edicts are inscribed.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 348.

⁵ Hultzsch has described the cluster of the minor rock edicts of Ashoka of Siddapura, Brahmagiri, Jatinga-Rameshvara as Rock inscriptions in the Mysore State. Hultzsch (1925, 1991), p. xxvi

Later Romila Thapar also devoted a complete chapter on the geographical locations of edicts in her work. According to her:

The locations of the edicts are of geographical importance, as the selection of their sites was not arbitrary. They were deliberately placed either near habitations, or on important travel routes, or at places of religious interest, thereby ensuring that they would be available to as many people as possible. ... Such an analysis demands considerable archaeological evidence to substantiate literary and epigraphical indications.⁶

Harry Falk in his recent publication—on the basis of his visits to the geographical locations of the site of the Ashokan inscriptions—argued that the Major Rock Edicts are located on the borders of the empire, while Pillar Edicts are connected with the places associated with the Buddhist Sangha and where there are wells in the vicinity. On the other hand, Minor Rock Edicts seem to be found at a certain distance from the habitation sites of ‘limited historical importance’. Even these are of no importance for the present day inhabitants, but some places are visited on certain occasions, once a year in the course of a *melā* or *yātrā*.⁷ Dilip K. Chakrabarti is of the view that certainly ‘Ashoka had his edicts set up in places where there would be large congregation of people, at least at certain appointed times of the year. Whether these congregations were in honour of the mother-goddess or other cults, the presence of which is somehow visible at many of the edict locations, or were simply meant for people gathering in annual fairs which are still held at many of these sites, is a question which cannot be readily answered’.⁸ On the basis of his field analysis Chakrabarti has tried to look at the network of these inscriptions as part of major routes of communications.

Asoka must have been a man of exceptional mental strength and vision to organize both his administration and missionary activity almost on a superhuman scale without any visible sign of duplicity. The only direct touch that we have with him is through his edicts, and the simple aspect of their locations sheds light on how the vast geographical area he possessed is still with us in the

⁶ Thapar (1961,1973), p. 228

⁷ Falk (2006),p. 57

⁸ Chakrabarti (2011), p. 1

ways people moved from place to place and read, or listened to, the royal messages from the wayside.⁹

The ecologies changed from region to region as did the social forms and economics. They were likely to have been ordered to be placed within specific geo-cultural contexts by Ashoka himself who, as we know, was based in Pataliputra, the capital of Magadha.

Discovery of the Ashokan edicts from Bairat

In terms of studying the archaeology of the Bairat region, two Ashokan inscriptions which came to light during the course of the nineteenth century, offer a vantage point in contextualizing the archaeological significance of the region in relation to the reign of the Mauryan ruler. In the year 1840, Captain Thomas Seymour Burt discovered an inscribed stone ‘upon a hill lying adjacent to’ Bairat. The slab was taken to Calcutta and placed in the Asiatic Society of Bengal. That is why it came to be known as the Calcutta-Bairat Rock inscription. T. S. Burt reported that he found the inscription ‘on a hard, grey granite block, irregularly shaped, and measuring about two feet in two of its dimensions, and a foot and a half in the third’.¹⁰ As Burt had mentioned that Bairat was at six ‘kos’ distant from Bhabra, and also mentions that he found the rock edict at Bhabra, the inscription began to be known as the ‘Bhabra edict’. D. R. Bhandarkar, however, in his progress report argued that Burt must have halted at ‘Bhabru’, which Burt mistook as Bhabra and visited Bairat after hearing about the inscription as it was not more than twelve miles. That is why the inscription must have been named after Bhabru. Bhandarkar mentioned that he was told the stone inscription was originally lying near the Hanuman shrine on the hill. The old residents of Bairat, in fact, used to say that the inscription was carried away from there by a European officer.¹¹ Alexander Cunningham, who surveyed the Bairat region during November 1864¹² also made it clear that ‘...the hill on which the inscription was found forms a conspicuous object about one mile to the south-west of Bairat’. He further mentioned that when he visited the region the hill was still known with the name of ‘Bijak-ki-Pahari’ which according to him can be

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 166

¹⁰ Burt (1840), pp. 616-619

¹¹ Bhandarkar (1910), p. 45

¹² Cunningham (1877), p. 22

rendered as 'the inscription hill'.¹³ While describing the invasion of Mahmud of Ghazni on Bairat, Ferishta has also mentioned a stone inscription. It proves the existence of an inscription in this region of relics and archaeological finds and that the language and script of the inscription was unknown at the time of Ghazni's invasion. This description is possibly of the Calcutta-Bairat Rock inscription.

The ruler of the country of Kairât unable to oppose the king, submitted, at the same time acknowledged the faith of Prophet. The Ghiznevide general, Ameer Ally, the son of Arslam Jazib, was now sent with a division of the army to reduce Nardein, which he accomplished, pillaging the country and carrying away many of the people captives. In Nardein, was a temple, which Ameer Ally destroyed, bringing from thence a stone on which were curious inscriptions, and which according to the Hindoos, must have been 40,000 years old.¹⁴

Burt's copy of the Calcutta-Bairat inscription was first lithographed, transcribed, and translated by Captain Markham Kittoe with the help of Pandit Kamala Kanta. The English translation of the inscription from the Sanskrit version prepared by the Pandit was done by Kittoe which was published in *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*.¹⁵

Following is the translation by Kittoe on the basis of the Sanskrit version of the Calcutta-Bairat inscription provided by Pandit Kamala Kanta:

Piadasa (the Beloved Raja), unto the multitude assembled in Magadha saluting him speaks (thus):

That the sacrifice of animals is forbidden, is well known unto ye; spare them: for those who are of the Buddhist faith such (sacrifice) is not meet, thus (spake he). The offering of uppusad is best of all. Some there are who kill- that which the Supreme Budha spake at the conclusion (of his commandments) was well spoken; those who act thus, follow in the right path, they will remain healthy in their faith for a length of time to come.

There are some who made blood offerings, (but) of these there are few, this is right and proper, (the Buddhist creed) these (of the faith) I protect, (likewise) those who keep company with the righteous and uncovetous.

The scriptures of Munis (the Vedas) are observed by their deciples; their future state is to be dreaded.

¹³ Cunningham (1871b), p. 344

¹⁴ Biggs (1908), pp. 64-65

¹⁵ Burt (1840)

The texts of the Vedas in which the sacrifice (of animals) is enjoined, are mean and false (obey them not); follow that which the lord Budha hath commanded; do so (practice) for the glorification of the faith (dharma). This I desire, that all of ye priests and priestesses; righteous men and religious women, yea everyone of ye, ever hearing this, bear it in your hearts! This my pleasure, I have caused it to be written, yea I have devised it.¹⁶

Later, Burt's eye-copy also formed the basis of the editions of Burnouf¹⁷ and Wilson¹⁸. Senart edited the copy and published a revised version of it. This inscription was the first important historical relic which came into light in the context of the Bairat region. Kittoe's translation of the edict is broadly incorrect as Ashoka has not said anything about animal killing in the Calcutta-Bairat inscription, and it seems to be based on the ongoing translation of the Ashokan edicts under Prinsep. He has mainly conveyed his deep faith in Buddhist order and authoritatively suggested specific Buddhist texts. The text of the inscription is available in many publications but the following is from E. Hultzsch's *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*.¹⁹

1 (A) Pr[i]yadas[i] l[ā]jā Māgadhe saṃghaṃ abhivāde[tū]naṃ āhā ap[ā]bādhatāṃ cha phāsu-
vihālatāṃ chā

2 (B) vidite v[e] bhaṃte āvatake h[a]mā Budhasi dhammasi saṃghasī ti gālave chaṃ prasāde cha
(C) e kechi bhaṃte

3 bhagavatā Budhe[na] bhāsīte sarve subhāsīte vā (D) e chu kho bhaṃte hamiyāye diseyā hevaṃ
sadhamme

4 chil[a-ṭhi]tūke hosatī ti alahāmi hakaṃ ta[m] v[ā]tave (E) imāi bhaṃt[e dha]mma-paliyāyāni
Vinaya-samukase

5 Aliya-vasāni Anāgata-bhayāi Muni-gāthā Moneya-sūte Upatisa-pasine e chā Lāghulo-

6 vāde musā-vādaṃ adhigichya bhagavatā Budhena bhāsīte etā bhaṃte dhamma-paliyāyāni ichhā

7 kiṃti bahuke bhikhu-[p]āye chā bhikhuniye ch[ā] abhikhinaṃ sun[e]yu chā upadhāl[a]yeyū chā

8 (F) hevaṃmevā upāsakā chā upāsikā chā (G) eteni bhaṃte imaṃ likhā[pa]yāmi abhipretaṃ me
jānamtū ti

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 619

¹⁷ *Le Lotus de la Bonne Loi*, p. 710 (reference cited in Hultzsch *CII*/vol. I) and Burnouf's translation of the Calcutta-Bairat inscription is also presented in Alexander Cunningham's *CII*, p. 131

¹⁸ *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. XVI, p. 357

¹⁹ Hultzsch (1925), pp. 172-173

Translation

(A) The Magadha King Priyadarshin, having saluted the Sangha, hopes that they are both well and Comfortable.

(B) It is known to you, Sirs, how great is my reverence and faith in the Buddha, the Dharma, (and) the Sangha.

(C) Whatsoever, Sirs, has been spoken by the blessed Buddha, all that is quite well spoken.

(D) But, Sirs, what would indeed appear to me (to be referred to by the words of the scripture): ‘thus the true Dharma will be of long duration’, that I feel bound to declare.

(E) The following expositions of the Dharma, Sirs, (viz.) (1) the *Vinaya-samukasa*, (2) the *Aliya-vasas*, (3) the *Anaagata-bhayas*, (4) the *Muni-gaathaas*, (5) the *Maneya-suta*, (6) the *Upatisa-pasina*, and (7) the *Laaghulovaada* which was spoken by the blessed Buddha concerning falsehood, I desire, Sirs, that many groups of monks and (many) nuns may repeatedly listen to these expositions of the Dharma, and may reflect (on them).

(F) In the same way both laymen and laywomen (should act).

(G) For the following (purpose), Sirs, am I causing this to be written, (viz.) in order that they may know my intention.²⁰

The discovery of the Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict made it evident that the historicity of the Bairat region could be traced back to the early historic phase, that is, around third century BCE.

Alexander Cunningham was the first archaeological surveyor appointed by the British Raj and later became the first Director of the newly founded Archaeological Survey of India in 1871. He carried out topographical surveys to find out geographical locations of the historical places mentioned in the travelogues of Xuanzang and Faxian. Similarly, he surveyed the Bairat region at the beginning of 1860s. The discovery of the Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict from Bijak-ki-Pahari, a flat topped hill in the region, would have also been a key element among his interests in the historical archaeology of Bairat from the perspective of Chinese pilgrims. Burt had definitely initiated a process which led to pushing back the historicity of the Bairat region to the early historic period in terms of discovering the Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict, but it was Alexander Cunningham who actually saw the historical potential through an archaeological perspective and mentioned that the town of Bairat is situated on a mound of ruins and is surrounded by fields covered with broken pottery and metal slag fragments. During his visit, however, he missed the

²⁰ Ibid. pp. 173-74.

Bairat Minor Rock Edict. This, as we know today, is the Sasaram and Rupnath version of the Minor Rock Edicts of Ashoka. Cunningham noted that:

In November 1864 I examined all the rocks on the top of this hill very carefully in the hope of finding some inscriptions; but my search was in vain, and I was assured by the people that no inscriptions existed on the hill.²¹

After Cunningham's survey, an Indian epigraphist and archaeologist BhagwanlalIndraji made the discovery of the Bairat Minor Rock Edict in mid-January 1872 and reported his discovery in a letter to the Nawab of Junagar. This report of his discovery on the Ashokan inscription was later published in the Gujarati magazine *Saurashtra Darpan*, May-June 1872. In the letter²² he mentions:

Virat is a small town. It is located at 40 miles northeast from Jaipur and about 30 miles southwest of Alwar on a slightly raised mound. Surrounded by the mountain range in the distance, it appears the place is fortified. It has a plain at the centre which is four miles broad from east to west and six miles long from north to south. To arrive at the plain from the outside, there are three passes of the size of a single carriage and nearly seventy-three foot-tacks. The soil of this plain is highly conducive to cultivation. Hence the thirteen small villages at the base of the hills are where people cultivate the land.

...on the southern side of Virat is a hillock with ancient Buddhist ruins. Near these ruins once stood an engraved stone inscription of Ashoka, which at present lies in the Asiatic Society Museum in Calcutta. While I was on the northern side of Virat, I discovered a new inscription at the foothill of Bhima ki Pahadi. It is engraved on a large granite stone.

A. C. L. Carlleyle, an assistant of Cunningham, unaware of the fact that the discovery had already been made by Indraji a few weeks earlier, claimed to have discovered the inscription towards the end of January, 1872. Cunningham also credited his assistant for this. In his work 'A Tour in Eastern Rajputana in 1871-72 and 1872-73' *Archaeological Survey of India, Vol. VI*,²³ done under the supervision of Cunningham, Carlleyle talks about this 'serendipitous discovery' while he passed through Bairat on the way from Machāri to Uncha Pahār. Although he did not really aim to explore the region—since the archaeological importance of the region had already

²¹ Cunningham (1877), p. 22

²² Courtesy: Virchand Dharamsey ji

²³ Carlleyle (1878)

been mentioned by Cunningham—his halt for two days in the region resulted in an accidental discovery of this Ashokan inscription on a rock under Pandu’s Hill (Bhim-ki-Doongri).

While Indrajī was quite comfortable about the possibility of reading of the inscription from the impressions that he had taken, and the name of the site, Carlleyle found it difficult to take impressions and only read the inscription. Bhim ki Pahadi or Bhim-ki-Doongri, which is also its present name, was not described by its name in Carlleyle’s observation but as ‘Pandū’s hill’. George Bühler provided the transcript of this inscription on the basis of the cloth copy taken by Bhagwanlal Indrajī which was also later reprinted by Alexander Cunningham in his *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. I.²⁴ So, it can reasonably be surmised that whereas B. Indrajī’s description of his discovery were published by Cunningham, it was Carlleyle who was acknowledged for the discovery of the Bairat Minor Rock Edict of Ashoka.

The following is the transcript of the Bairat Minor Rock Edict from E. Hultzsch’s *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*.

- 1 (A) Devānāmpīye āh[ā] (B) s[ā]ti.....
- 2 vasān[i] ya hakaṁ upaāsake (C) [no chu] bādham.....
- 3 aṁ mamayā saghe [u]payāte [bā]dha cha.....
- 4 Jambhudipasi amisā na devehi.....[m]i.....[ka]masa esa.....l[e]
- 5 (G) [no] hi e[s]e ma[ha]taneva chakiye.....kamaminenā
- 6 vipule pi śvage [cha]kye [ā]lādhetā[v]e (H)kā cha [u]d[ā]lā chā
[pala]kamatu [t]i
- 7 [aṁ]tā pi cha jānāntu ti [ch]ila-ṭhit.....laṁ pi
vaḍhisati.....
- 8 diyaḍhiyaṁ vaḍhi[sa]ti.....

The Minor Rock Edicts I of Ashoka are considered as the oldest of Ashokan inscriptions with some linguistic variations in the various versions discovered at different places of the subcontinent. These have been found in sixteen places so far and, as Falk points out, placed far away from sites of human habitation. The northern Minor Rock Edicts, which have been found so far at Sasaram (Sasahram), Gurhupur, Ahraura, Rupnath, Panguraria, Gujjara, Bairat, and

²⁴ Ibid. p. 139

Delhi carry textual variations and on the basis of the slight differences in the language of the versions, Bairat falls within the category of the Sasaram-Rupnath version of the Minor Rock Edicts.

The Bairat Minor Rock Edict was quite damaged when it was found and even the readability of the inscriptions has gone worse with the time. The following is the English version of the Bairat Minor Rock Edict on the basis of the Hindi translation carried out by Rajbali Pandey.²⁵

- (1) Devanampriya speaks thus- Somewhat more.....
- (2) I have been a worshiper. But I had (not) been very.....
- (3) I have entered the Sangha, (I) have been very.....
- (4) Gods (had been) unmingled in Jambudvipa.....mingled.....
- (5) This is the fruit of zeal. This cannot be attained alone by the person of high ranks.
with great zeal
- (6) great heaven can be attained. Lowly and exalted may be zealous.
- (7) Even the people at borders may know. This zeal may be of long duration.
.....progress considerably.
- (8) (It will) progress to one and a half.....

(English translation author's)

²⁵ Pandey (1951)

circumambulation. It has a domical roof and a half arched ceiling in the aisle.²⁷The comparison does not seem to be appropriate as the Tulja Leni Caitya-griha architecture usually has an



Fig: 4. A view of monastery cells on the upper terrace of Bijak-ki-Pahari from south

apsidal plan, whereas the brick sanctuary and monastic structure on Bijak-ki-Pahari has a rectangular plan with circular sanctuary.

The foundation of the structure goes back to the time of Ashoka as there are hundreds of pieces of polished Chunar sandstone and a large number of unpolished ones which are undoubtedly of ‘one or more Ashokan pillars’; a broken piece from the shaft which preserves a part of the well-cut tapering hole to fit the metallic bolt to support the abacus of the capital of the Ashokan pillar; and numerous fragments of a large stone umbrella of Ashokan workmanship—the largest of them is sixteen and a half inches long and six inches thick. Scholars have often argued that Ashokan pillars marked the site of the Buddhist stupa or shrines which can clearly be seen at Sanchi, Sarnath, and other pillar inscriptions sites. The fragments at Bairat also highlight this clearly.

Apart from this, several bricks of the rectangular enclosure wall around the temple are found with inscribed Brahmi *aksharas* which Sahni sought to contextualize with Ashoka’s message to the laity and members of the Sangha that gets reflected in the form of the Calcutta-

²⁷ Vasant (2000), p. 23

Bairat Rock edict of Ashoka.²⁸ According to him, a few of them read as *pāsām, visa, vi, kama*, etc.

Six out of the eight punch-marked coins which were discovered at Bijak-ki-Pahari are on display in the Viratnagar museum (Rajkiya Kala Dirgha, Department of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of Rajasthan). I could only photograph and study them from a distance on the obverse side as displayed. A few symbols can be identified like sun, six armed symbol, bull and snake. There are three different human figures stamped on three sides of coin A and the fourth side seems to be having a tree-like impression. All these symbols are there on the coins associated with the Magadha empire.²⁹

The twenty eight Indo-Greek coins that were found at the excavation site along with eight punch-marked coins and the dull red ware pottery in association with later renovations and constructions (which is evident from the comparatively smaller size of the bricks used in these constructions) on Bijak-ki-Pahari provide inference that the region became a part of the Indo-Scythians and then Indo-Greek rule in the post-Mauryan period.

The evidence of the Buddhist chaitya gives an idea that the region must have had an urban centre during the Mauryan period or was gaining importance during that time—with a significant population. The hill ranges that surround Bairat region gives an impression of a naturally fortified place with the local population providing patronage to the Sangha there.

The recent discovery, during my fieldwork, of an early historic site, Khera-ki-Dhani, points to wider occupational existence in the early centuries of the Common Era. The study of the pottery of Bairat from the Central Antiquity Collection, Purana Qila, ASI, and the surface finds of Khera-ki-Dhani further makes it evident. The region, overall, has revealed a range of wheel-made dull red ware-jars with outward projecting rounded, nail headed and triangular rims, carinated handis, *lota* shaped miniature vessels, incurved bowls, bottled sprinklers, lid cum dishes, etc. of course grained medium fabric. The pottery is mostly without any slip or wash. This type of pottery has also been found in other sites of north India associated with the early centuries CE.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 31

²⁹ Gupta (1969), pp. 239-240

To see the stratigraphical sequence and antiquity of iron in Bairat, another excavation was done by N.R. Banerjee on Bijak-ki-Pahari in 1962-63 under the North-Western circle of Archaeological Survey of India. This Bairat excavation has revealed four successive periods of cultural occupation, from PGW upto the medieval glazed ware and all these cultural occupations developed in association with iron artifacts which takes back the antiquity of iron in the region to the PGW culture.³⁰ Out of these four, Period I is marked by representations of PGW with an overlapping of NBPW and Period II is represented by NBPW and its related finds which indicates that the region was occupied and developing before the PGW culture and later it was thought to be an important region for spreading the messages of king Ashoka. Period III is marked by the dull red ware which prevailed during the early centuries of the Christian era. However, no detailed report of the excavation which revealed this stratigraphic cultural occupation was published. These could have provided details of these pottery types and the antiquities of which only a few specimens are on display at the Viratnagar Museum.

Besides this, the present town of Bairat itself is spread over a mound of considerable height, roughly fourteen meters or so. The mound is 438 meters above sea level which goes up to a height of 452 meters. According to Alexander Cunningham, Bairat was situated on a mound of ruins and the fields surrounding the town were also covered with broken pottery and fragments of slag from the ancient copper works.³¹ When he wrote about copper slag, Cunningham mentioned its presence in the surrounding fields and not on the mound. During my fieldwork, it was the concentration of iron slag that was very clearly visible in the areas which are exposed in the sections of the mound which are at a height of about four meters from its base. The town is located at the eastern end of the central valley which, according to Carlleyle, is situated on a raised terrace or platform which is partly natural, partly built.³² Possibly, it would reveal strata over strata of different cultures over a period of time if it was possible to excavate any portion of it. But there is no doubt that the habitations cover the old cultural remains. This is evident from the presence of the metal slag and remains of bricks and stones which have been used while building houses of the modern town. Presently, there are a lot of late medieval brick structures on the mound but they are in ruined condition.

³⁰ *Indian Archaeology: A Review 1962-63*, p. 31

³¹ Cunningham (1871a), p. 245

³² Carlleyle (1878), p. 97

Text and Context

Inscriptions unlike manuscripts are texts embedded within more specific material contexts. It is important to unite text and the context. Ashokan inscriptions which were discovered during the course of nineteenth and twentieth century across the subcontinent are written in the Brahmi, Kharoshthi, and also in Greek and Aramaic. This alone is clearly indicative of the fact that Mauryan emperor Ashoka was quite aware and sensitive towards how his messages should be conveyed to his subjects. ‘The linguistic variants in the inscriptions points to an impressive linguistic reach with the potential of large number of people becoming familiar with the ethic’.³³ This is evident in the Minor Rock Edict I found in northern regions of India, written in the so called Magadhan Prakrit also noticed in Ashokan Pillar Edicts, the Rock Edicts at Dhauli and Jaugada, the Major Rock Edicts at Erragudi, and the Barabar Hill cave inscriptions. According to D. C. Sircar the principal characteristics of the dialect are the representations of *ra* in Sanskrit words by *la*, *d* by *ḍ* and *ṣa* by *sa*. These characteristics are there in the Bairat Minor Rock Edict and Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict of Ashoka. For e.g. *rājā* is inscribed as *lājā* (L.1 Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict), *palakamatu* and *uḍālā* (L.6 Bairat MRE) and some forms are nearer to Sanskrit in case of certain words like *mahataneva* for *mahatanevaeva* (L.5 Bairat MRE) and *śvage* for *sarge* (L.6 Bairat MRE).³⁴ Similar characteristics are also present in the Delhi-Bahapur Minor Rock Edict which is often called the shorter version of the Bairat Minor Rock Edict. The texts of the Minor Rock Edict I found in the central region of the country and the texts of the Minor Rock Edict I and II discovered in the south, however exhibit different traits. The southern as well as many of the central versions do not have the change of Sanskrit *ra* to *la* while a few of the central texts exhibit both the characteristics, in that they retain Sanskrit *ra* in some cases but change it to *la* in others. For e.g. Gujjara and Rupnath retain both the characteristics.³⁵

Apart from linguistic variations in northern, central, and southern versions of the Minor Rock edicts there is also difference in the tone of the proclamations of Minor Rock Edict I and Minor Rock Edict II of the Mauryan emperor. In the former, he is addressing people of a particular place to bring their attention towards the religion he has converted to. Whereas in the latter, which are only available in southern India alongside Minor Rock Edict I as mentioned

³³ Thapar (2012), p. 35

³⁴ Sircar (2006), p. 127

³⁵ Sircar (2000), p. 57

above, he is ordering his subordinates (*mahamatras*) to propagate his aims and intentions to his subjects through *their* subordinates (*rajukas*), to follow and respect traditional behaviours. Minor Rock Edict II represents a kind of authoritative tone of the ruler where Minor Rock Edict I shows the conviction of an *upasaka*.

This sensitivity towards diversity across the empire Ashoka was ruling, also gets reflected when we see the title *Devanampriya Priyadarshi Raja* (in most of the edicts) i.e. the king who is beloved of the ‘gods’, and looks upon all with love. All the versions of the Minor Rock Edict I have a reference to *devanampriya* which is an honorific title (often taken as humble) in which he has used *deva* in plural. However, the meaning of *deva* varied from gods to kings.³⁶ As Xuanzang, the Chinese Monk who travelled to India in 629-645 CE ‘refers to Ashoka summoning the ‘inferior gods’ and ordering them to go across Jambudvipa and to build stupas on Buddha’s relics wherever there was a population of full *koti*’.³⁷

Both the edicts—the Bairat Minor Rock Edict and the Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict of the Mauryan emperor which have so far come to light in the Bairat region—have a strong Buddhist flavour. In the Minor Rock Edict I Ashoka conveys how his relationship with the Sangha had grown stronger as he had drawn closer to the Buddhist monastic order and because of his exertions in propagating Dhamma, gods and men had come to mingle on earth. He further describes that this Dhamma is not only for the rich but could also be attained by the poor. In the Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict, on the other hand, the king seems to speak as an *upasaka* while he takes the unostentatious title of *raja Magadha*, the king of Magadha, in addressing the Sangha. He states his faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and expresses his deep concern for the unity and general welfare of the Sangha. The inscription carries the sanction of the sovereign authority Ashoka as king of Magadha. It commands clergy as well as laity to do constant contemplation of teachings of Buddha specifying seven texts (1) The Exaltation of Discipline (*Vinaya-samukasa*), (2) The Course of Conduct of the Great Saints (*Aliya-vasas*), (3) Fears of what may happen (*Anaagata-bhayas*), (4) The Song of the Hermit (*Muni-gaathaas*), (5) The Dialogue on the Hermit’s Life (*Maneya-suta*), (6) The Questioning of Upatishya (*Upatisa-*

³⁶ Thapar (2012), p.26

³⁷ Ray (2012), p.72

pasina), and (7) The Address to Rahula (*Laaghulovaada*). The identification of these texts present in the Calcutta-Bairat inscription was not easy.

The identification of these suggested texts had led to a lot of scholarly conjectures. But with the efforts of T. W. Rhys Davids³⁸ and Dharmanand Kosambi³⁹ all the seven passages cited in the inscription got identified in the Nikaya portion of the Buddhist Canon, on the basis of the reading of Emile Senart⁴⁰. With consensus, *Aliya-vasasis* identified as *Aliya-vasāni* of the *Sangīti Sutta* of *Dīgha Nikāya* which is ‘the holy ways of living of the Nobel ones’⁴¹. *Anaagata-bhayasis* taken as *Anāgata Bhayāni* (which is mentioned in Sutta 78 of *Aṅguttar Nikāya*, Vol. III, pp.105-108) by Kosambi as this Sutta is regarding admonitions of age, famine, war, and schism. According to him, the widely accepted identification of this text by Rhys Davids as Sutta 79 of *Aṅguttar Nikāya*, Vol. III about the prophecy of the dangers to arise in the future, is incorrect.⁴² *Muni-gaathaas* was identified as *Munī Sutta* of *Sutta Nipāta*, (stanzas 207-221, p. 36) which talks about discourse on the sage. *Maneya-suta* which Davids identified with *Moneyya Sutta* with regard to ‘the attainment quite beyond the laity’ mentioned in *Aṅguttar Nikāya*, (Vol. I, p. 173) and also in *Itivuttaka* (number 67) was also considered incorrect by Kosambi. Kosambi associated the text with *Nālaka Sutta* (stanza 22) of *Sutta Nipāta* in which Buddha sets forth *Nālaka* for learning the factors of simple life, simplicity of food and dwelling, chastity, etc., in short, the fundamentals of morality.⁴³ Kosambi’s identification of the text goes better with the idea of Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict.

Identification of *Vinaya-samukasa*, *Upatisa-pasina* and *Laaghulovaada* has been far more difficult. Rhys Davids and Kosambi were both unable to identify them. The single reference to this word was found in *Parivār* (VI. 4) which means the four great standards, which most likely were the four mentioned in the *Mahavagga*.⁴⁴ Davids was unable to recognize the reference for *Upatisa-pasina* since many of passages justly bear this title. According to Kosambi, *Upatisa* is a name of the great disciple *Sāriputta* who asked lots of questions related to simple

³⁸ Rhys Davids (1898), p. 639

³⁹ Kosambi (1912), pp. 37-40

⁴⁰ *Les Inscriptions de Piyadasi* Vol. 2 (1886), p. 119 cited in Kosambi (1912), p. 37

⁴¹ Kosambi (1912), p. 37; Rhys Davids (1898), p. 640

⁴² Kosambi (1912), p. 39

⁴³ *Ibid.* pp. 39-40

⁴⁴ Bhikkhu, Thanissaro (1993) *That the True Dhamma Might Last a Long Time: Readings Selected by King Asoka*
<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authorsthanissaro/asoka.html>

and righteous life in *Sāriputta Sutta* of *Sutta Nipāta* which he thinks is appropriate and suits better the purpose of the edict.⁴⁵ Both the scholars have similar views about *Laaghulovaada* which Davids identified as the *Rāhulovād Suttas* (vol. 414-420 and 420-426) of *Majjhima Nikāya*. It deals with *Rāhula's* concern with subject of falsehood.⁴⁶ The selection of these seven texts suggests Ashoka's concern about controlling the growing dissents in the Sangha and for the laity to live a simple and moralistic life.

Though we get quite similar kinds of expressions in the Schism Pillar Edicts of Sarnath, Sanchi, and Kosambi where Ashoka addresses the Buddhist Sangha and warns monks and nuns of the consequences of creating dissention within the monastic order, in the Calcutta-Bairat inscription the way Ashoka, with authority and confidence, recommended Buddhist texts to Sangha is without precedent. The confidence and authority of a monarch in the religious and monastic matters of the Buddhist order is visible in these inscriptions.



Fig: 5. View of the lower terrace of Bijak-ki-Pahari from northwest (168- P. 3479/1905-10 Rajputana) and Bairat MRE Rock (164-P. 3477/ 1905-10 Rajputana) in 1909-1910

Courtesy: Photo Section, ASI

On the one hand, Ashoka is showing authoritative superiority and sovereignty as an emperor when he presents himself as the Raja of Magadha ruling from Pataliputra, whereas, on the other hand he has also presented himself as a Buddhist monarch who should be taken seriously when he suggests and asks monks and nuns as well as the laity to read the seven Buddhist texts which he has mentioned in the Calcutta-Bairat Rock edict and warns them for creating any kind of rift in the Sangha in the Sanchi, Sarnath, and Kosambi Schism Pillar Edicts.

⁴⁵ Kosambi (1912), p. 40

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.37

Vincent Smith called Ashoka both a monk and a monarch.⁴⁷ On the basis of the analysis of the inscriptions of Ashoka, Smith argues:

His authentic records show him to have been the same man throughout his career from 257 BC to the end, a zealous Buddhist and at the same time a watchful, vigorous, autocratic ruler of Church and State.⁴⁸



Fig: 6. A. view of the Buddhist chaitya on the lower terrace on Bijak-ki-Pahari from southwest

⁴⁷ Smith (1920), p. 35

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p. 36

Both these identities get reflected in the Calcutta-Bairat inscription where first, Ashoka addresses the Sangha as the Raja of Magadha and then shows his authority and confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. The confidence in suggesting the texts to be contemplated by the monks and nuns as well as the laity also shows his deep faith in Buddhism as an *upasaka*. His relationship with the Sangha as an *upasaka* is also quite significant in the Bairat



Fig: 7. Mother goddess worship inside a cave of Bhim-ki-Doongri

Minor Rock Edict (and other versions of the MRE I) where Ashoka has presented his missionary zeal by saying that because he has drawn closer to the Sangha and also because of his effort, gods and men have come together on earth.

Ashoka has also stressed on the fact that by true zeal and faith alone, not only the rich but also the poor can attain heaven. Sircar has deduced—on the basis of his analysis of various versions of Minor Rock Edict I—that these were the earliest edicts, which were issued in Ashoka's thirteenth regnal year when he was away on a pilgrimage which lasted for 256 days.⁴⁹

Due to its proximity to Bhim-ki-Dungri containing evidence of Mother Goddess worship, Falk argues that the Bairat MRE I, like many other MRE sites, could also have seen congregations of people on certain occasions in the form of *melas* or *yatras*. Even today fairs are held here in the months of Bhadrapada and Magha. The mother goddess shrine or Ambika Shakti Pitha of Papri village in the region too has mythological connection as it is believed to be the place where the toes of the left foot of Sati fell, and is believed to have formed a part of the local belief system from ancient times. But whether these cultic developments were there during the time of Ashoka and are not post-Ashokan developments is hard to say. If the people during the time of Ashoka were congregating there around some mother-goddess cult or any other folk deity, Ashoka was using the socio-religious space to attract them to a new religion of which he was undoubtedly the most famous convert.

⁴⁹ 256 nights has been interpreted as little over eight and a half lunar months, or nearly three-fourths of a lunar year of three hundred and fifty four days. Sircar (2000), p. 78

Movement of people has always been an important factor in spread of ideas and messages and this movement must have been central to Ashoka's messages and proclamations getting conveyed to as many people as possible. Whether it was large congregations of people on certain occasions⁵⁰, at least once a year as Falk has suggested or, being the part of the trade route network, which is the essence of Chakrabarti's argument⁵¹, the idea of moving from one place to another is very much there.

Bairat was a flourishing region during the Mauryan period. Rima Hooja has mentioned that 'during the period of Mauryan Empire (with its capital in Pataliputra and several provincial capitals headed by *Kumaras* and *Mahamatras*), there are indications of Mauryan influence—as a possible missionary sway and even domination—over parts of Rajasthan which is evident with the availability of various brick, wood, and stone architectural and art remains found at Bairat, Rairh, Nagari, Chittorgarh, and Lalsot'.⁵² The structural remains of the Buddhist chaitya and monastery, fragments of Ashokan Pillars, presence of two Ashokan inscriptions in the region, punch-marked coins and overlapping PGW and NBPW cultures which got revealed in the excavations clearly takes back the Bairat region to the early historic period and gives an idea that the region was the part of the Mauryan empire, connected with Pataliputra—the capital of Magadha.

By placing these edicts in their context, it appears that Bairat was part of one of the prominent cultural and political circuits which made it an important region for the proclamation of royal edicts and establishment of Buddhist monasteries. It is interesting to note that the Delhi-Bahapur Minor Rock Edict I which is regarded as the shorter version of the Bairat MRE (somewhat nearer to this inscription in language and content than the rest) was very much a part of this circuit of movement as Bairat stood in the vicinity of an ancient feeder route to 'Uttarapatha' which was a major trade and communication route during the first millennium BCE.⁵³ This feeder route connected the southern parts of Rajasthan to Delhi and Mathura. How far the cultic connections of Bairat and Delhi go back—so that they could become the reason for

⁵⁰ Even Separate Rock Edict I and II both advocate some sort of ceremonial, congregational reading of the edicts on certain occasions. In case of most of the edicts the inscription is not at immediate eye-level, at least not the upper most section of the inscription which might have been discouraging for an individual to read it separately.

⁵¹ Chakrabarti (2011)

⁵² Hooja (2006), pp 105-110

⁵³ Lahiri (1992)

placing MRE of Ashoka in the vicinity—is very difficult to say but this is worth exploring in future.

Ashoka redistributed the relics of the Buddha and ordered to get them enshrined in 84,000 stupas in various cities within his empire and many of them were seen by Xuanzang in the seventh century. Xuanzang, in the account of his journey, mentioned that the region possessed eight monasteries, but they were very much ruined, and the number of monks was small. When he mentions Ashokan pillars at various sites in India he does not mention the pillar on Bijak-ki-Pahari that means that the pillar was already broken when he arrived. He also mentions ‘Brahmanas of different sects, about 1000 in number, possessed twelve temples, and their followers were numerous, as the bulk of the population was described as heretical’.⁵⁴ It becomes quite clear that by his time the region was not popular with respect to Buddhist monasteries.

It is important to place the text within its context to get away from a generalized historical picture. Apart from appreciating the wide spread of similar versions of Ashokan edicts across the geography of the subcontinent, after analysing the text and the context, it clearly appears that sensitivity towards the diversity of different regions and promulgating particular type of messages and proclamations was very much a part of the ideology of Ashokan inscriptions. These texts could be studied and situated within their local-regional moorings which must have played a significant role in dissemination of royal messages and proclamations.

The Sasaram and Rupnath versions of the Minor Rock Edict I in the Bairat region and the Calcutta-Bairat inscription of Ashoka provide us a lens into Ashoka’s Dhamma. The Calcutta-Bairat inscription has established Ashoka’s faith in the Buddhist religion and his consequent exhortations to monks and nuns and to lay piety to listen to and to study seven select passages from Buddhist scriptures, for which he himself showed a special preference. And the different versions of the Minor Rock Edict I including the Bairat version clearly show his keen interest in the propagation of a particular kind of Dhamma. Taking this analysis along with the Schism Edicts of Sanchi, Sarnath, and Kosambi and the symbolic and carved occurrences of the Elephant

⁵⁴ Cunningham (1871a), p. 246

in Kalsi, Girnar, and Dhauri inscriptions, the argument is that Ashoka's Dhamma should be seen as being associated with Buddhism.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Professor Nayanjot Lahiri for her valuable guidance during M Phil and towards making this paper. I am indebted to her and to Dr Abdul Rashid Lone for accompanying me on my fieldwork and making it a learning experience. Discovery of the site, Khera-ki-Dhani, would not have been possible without them.

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