Beyond Toleration: Civility and Principled Coexistence in Asokan Edicts

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Secular nationalism developed in India with its own myths and legends. In his self-transformative, nationalist classic, The Discovery of India, Jawaharlal Nehru quotes H.G. Wells: "Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history ... the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star... More living men cherish his memory today than have ever heard of Constantine or Charlemagne." In another work, Glimpses of World History, Nehru writes, "Men of religion have seldom, very seldom, been as tolerant as Ashoka. In order to convert people to their own faith they have seldom scrupled to use force and terrorism and fraud. The whole of history is full of religious persecution and religious wars, and in the name of religion and of Gods perhaps more blood has been shed than in any other name. it is good therefore to remember how a great son of India, intensely religious, and the head of a powerful empire, behaved in order to convert people to his ways of thought. It is strange that any one should be so foolish as to think that religion and faith can be thrust down a person’s throat at the point of the sword or a bayonet." In the mythology of secular nationalism, Asoka is the tolerant king par excellence.

It was only a matter of time before a step was taken within the nationalist narrative to move from tolerance to secularism. It was claimed that Ancient India, particularly in Asoka’s time (304-232 B.C.E) and because of his initiative, formulated a conception of the proto-secular state in India. Asoka's tolerance towards all religions was the forerunner of the policy of religious neutrality associated with secularism. The clear

implication of this was that this new attempt would not have been possible without something akin to a secular state in the Indian tradition.

This view has been vigorously challenged in India, particularly for its inexcusable anachronism— it reads too much of the present into the past. Obviously at issue here is not the term ‘secular’. The anachronism is not due to the extrapolation of a currently used term to an entity in the past. The absence of a suitable translation of ‘secular’ in any Indian language is only a small piece of evidence in the overall argument, not its conclusion. Even the absence of a clear concept points only to the low level of articulacy of secular orientation, not to the lack of it. The crux of the matter is the availability of a conceptual resource. But let me not confuse the reader by introducing the distinction between a concept and a conceptual resource. Assume that some scholars have claimed that a full fledged attempt, regardless of its success then or in the future, was made by Asoka to formulate a conception of what we now call the secular state.\(^4\) A few years ago I would have ridiculed this claim on the ground that ideas presuppose specific contexts and these contexts are not reproduced from time to time. However, today I am only cautiously critical because I see that these scholars were trying to put their finger on something important, even though they were making obvious mistakes in doing so.

In order to rescue the claim, we need to formulate it differently: at crucial junctures in Indian history, certain conceptual spaces were opened up which, under certain conditions, and provided we build an appropriate narrative, can be seen to contribute to the growth of modern secularism. I have used the word conceptual space in the plural. I mean here that some spaces open up simultaneously or over time that enable multiple historical agents to imagine new concepts, provided they have the motivation to do so. A conceptual space may open up and may remain wholly unutilized for long periods of time, sometimes so long that it may entirely recede out of our background, totally forgotten. Or else, it may get filled up by concepts, though these concepts may be in different stages of articulacy, some clearly formed, others, only half done, still others barely born. Some concepts in the
space may have a very short life- they get made, are used and destroyed; Others have a much longer period of gestation. Most are revived, modified, recast, recycled, reappropriated. Some are even mutated. The important thing is they are available in the conceptual stock as a resource, for use, dissemination, and under certain conditions, for mobilization.

A reasonably articulated and complex concept draws elements from multiple conceptual spaces, provided there are agents with the motivation to do so. This usually happens over long periods of time. This conceptual work is never fully finished and frequently never fully related to one another. So, one may find different concepts generated over different periods of time that retrospectively belong to one family or strongly resemble one another. Seen teleologically, some older conceptual elements, may even be seen as evolving into something that is seen now to be well formed. At key moments in the history of a society all these elements drawn from different periods of history and therefore from different conceptual spaces may be forged together to form a broad conception. Such a conception may even crystallize around a single word. Often the same word is used as the foci of the crystallization of many related conceptions. One can trace their different trajectories and offer a narrative of the different sources of a concept and a term associated with it (or many concepts and a term or one concept with many terms associated with it).

Now, I wish to argue that one such space was opened up in 3rd century B.C.E. by Asokan edicts and filled by the conception of Dhamma, and this partly explains its crucial importance to Modern India’s secular project. But Asoka’s Dhamma can be easily misunderstood. Official Indian ideology, encouraged by modern scholarly commentators have frequently associated it with the idea of toleration. This is misleading, particularly if we don't grasp the background context in which Dhamma emerges. Dhamma, I argue, was a major attempt to introduce norms of civility among rival followers of major systems of beliefs and practices, to forge an order where potentially conflicting Pasandas could enjoy principled coexistence.
I
TWO EDICTS ON INTER-GROUP RELATIONS

Asoka’s edicts, rediscovered between late 18th and mid 20th century, lie scattered in more than thirty places throughout India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Most of them are written in Brahmi script from which all Indian scripts and many of those used in Southeast Asia later developed. The language used in the edicts found in the eastern part of the sub-continent is Prakrit, associated with the people of Magadh, the one used in edicts found in the western part of India is closer to Sanskrit, using the Kharoshthi script, one extract of Edict 13 is in Greek and one bilingual edict in Kandahar, Afghanistan is written in Greek and Aramaic. Asoka’s edicts, the earliest decipherable corpus of written documents from India, have survived throughout the centuries because they are written on rocks, cave walls and stone pillars. These edicts were decoded by British archaeologist and historian, James Prinsep

The location of the rock edicts, often governed by the availability of suitable rocks, are found along the borders of the empire; the edicts on pillars were largely in specific cities and along roads within the empire. Some, like the Lumbini pillar, mark the Buddha’s birthplace, while its inscriptions commemorate Asoka's pilgrimage to that place. Others are to be found wherever there was sufficient concentration of populations so that they could reach as many people as possible. These edicts appear to be in Asoka's own words rather than in the more formal language in which royal edicts or proclamations in the ancient world were usually written. At the core of these edicts are a set of precepts about how to lead a good individual and collective life. For the purposes of this essay, however, I focus on 2 major rock edicts, no VII and no XII.
What do these edicts tell us? The 7th edict begins with "The beloved of the gods wishes that "all Pasandas\(^5\) must dwell everywhere, in every part of his kingdom." This seems like a simple, quite inconsequential statement and has been treated as such by commentators who have a rather sanguine view of social and religious conditions in Ashoka's India. Thus, Vincent Smith claims that 'the Dharma which he preached and propagated unceasingly with amazing faith in the power of sermonizing, had few, if any, distinctive features. The doctrine was essentially common to all religions. When we apply to Asoka's policy the word 'toleration' with its modern connotation and justly applaud the liberality of his sentiments, another qualification is needed, and we must remember that in his days no really diverse religions existed in India. Buddhism and Jainism both were originally mere sects of Hinduism- or rather schools of philosophy founded by Hindu reformers—which in course of time gathered an accretion of mythology around the original speculative nucleus, and developed into religions.\(^7\) The same sentiment is echoed by Radhakumud Mookerjee who says, 'It is to be remembered that Asoka's toleration was easy enough among the different denominations of the time, which were all but offshoots of the same central faith and did not differ among themselves so completely as the religions of Jesus, Zoroaster, or Mahomet introduced later into the country. Thus it was not difficult for the emperor, with due credit to the liberality of his views, to discern 'the essence of the matter in all sects' and honour it duly.'\(^8\)

To be sure, some commentators recognized that Asokan edicts are written in times of intense sectarian strife.\(^9\) For instance, D.R. Bhandarkar says that people in Asoka's times

\(^5\) This is one of the most difficult terms to translate. Its standard meaning is 'heretic', but clearly Asoka does not use it in this sense. The standard translation is 'sect' which is unsatisfactory because of its Christian association. There is an imaginative suggestion, now rejected, that it might be linked to prasha, a term in avestha and similar to prashna in sanskrit, meaning 'question.' An imaginative translation could then have been a group of questioners or enquirers. But there is no strong evidence to support this view. Radha Kumud Mookerjee links it to Parishad, meaning assembly. But that too is not accepted by everyone. Perhaps, the best translation would be 'followers of a school of thought or teachings.' I here use it to mean this and will continue to use the prakrit word 'Pasanda' in the main text.


\(^7\) Vincent Smith, Asoka, Buddhist King of India, OUP. Oxford, 1920, p61.


had lost sight of the essentials of their faith and begun to focus excessively on rituals and theology. In these matters, there was unending acrimonious wrangling. Therefore, 'When Asoka lived and preached, religious fanaticism and sectarian spirit were rampant.'

Yet even he seems not to link this wish of the beloved of the gods to have his subjects co-inhabit to rampant sectarianism or to realize its real import. Why should Ashoka have said this? What could be context be in which he is compelled to say this? We get no sense of this from existing literature. At any rate, it is not clear what form this strife took? Were sects expelling one another from territories where each was dominant? Had they segregated one another? Was something akin to what we call now 'ethnic or religious cleansing' attempted in that period? But if intense sectarian strife existed, there must at least have been some violence between sects, even if it was not purely motivated by doctrine. It is again hard to tell unless we try and imagine vividly what the background conditions were to some of these key edicts.

The 12th edict implores that all pasandas restrain their speech, a specification of a more general self-restraint, samyama, mentioned in the 7th edict. This is seen as a virtue, even a civic virtue. But why restrain only speech? Why is this the core, the saara of all pasandas? Why burden it with so much importance? What is the link between restraint on speech and co-existence? Does speech have the power to disrupt coexistence? We all know that it can but under what conditions is it so acutely significant as to become one of the central problems of a society and the chief concern of its royal edicts? Does speech have the power to push everyone over the edge or are people already so much on the edge that even speech can push them over it? Surely, it is easy for a reasonable person to tolerate people with whom she has minor differences. The difficulty of tolerance arises only when people with major, virtually irreconcilable differences encounter one another. What then is the context in which speech is virtually the sole carrier of deeply uncomfortable, major differences?

III

10 Ibid., 111-113.
11 There is virtual consensus that this was a period of bitter sectarian strife. Bhandarkar says 'It is plain that there was friction and bitter spirit between these (Ajivikas, Nirgranthas and Buddhists) sects' and 'When Asoka lived religious fanaticism and sectarianism was rampant'. See D.R. Bhandarkar, Asoka, Asian Educational Services, Calcutta, 1925, p112.
BACKGROUND: PRE-AXIAL CONFLICTS IN INDIA

The Sixth Century BCE was a period of great social ferment. Karl Jaspers has famously termed this extraordinary period in world history as the Axial Age. Jasper’s own formulation is deeply problematic, yet it does point to something of huge importance in every major civilization. 12 Among Indian historians Romila Thapar came quite close to making much the same point. She describes this period as a ‘century of questioning’. There was vigorous debate and discussion among multiple sects concerned both with ‘religious belief and philosophical speculation’. Among these Thapar singles out the uncompromising materialism of the early Charvakas, the metaphysical subtleties of the Upanishadic thinkers and the dominant ritualism of the Vedic Brahmins. It seems that for her local, internal critiques had by this period given way to a more general and accentuated social critique, hence the term the ‘century of questioning’. I do not dispute this, but quite clearly the term ‘axiality’ refers to something deeper, signaling that something extraordinarily new was now at stake. Thapar’s description of this ferment does not quite get here.

I believe that despite all its problems, the term 'axiality' is not entirely inappropriate for this period, for something new and very radical begins to take shape, changing the entire intellectual landscape and carrying the potential of an enormous social revolution. 13 In order to better grasp what I have in mind, I would try to offer a quasi-phenomenological account of this period.

Pre-Buddhist India was dominated by the Vedas. The Rg Veda, the first and most important of these, contains hymns first meant only to be recited and much later written down. The hymns were essentially for the Khsatriyas and the Brahmanas and reflected

13 It has been argued especially by Sheldon Pollock that many features here described as prior to and definitive of the Vedic culture may in fact have developed in response to the threat posed by Buddhism. But he agrees that such proclivities were always present within it. See Sheldon Pollock, ibid., p. 410.
the beliefs and practices of these two upper castes. The hymns centered around sacrificial rituals (yajnas) performed for wealth, good health, sons, and a long life for the yajamana - all constituents of a this-worldly conception of human flourishing. Some sacrifices were simple, domestic affairs, performed by the householder. Others involved animal sacrifice in order to procure horses, cows, land and more riches, for which the participation of ritual specialists was requisite.

Ritual sacrifice was also seen to be propitiating gods, powerful, mostly benevolent beings who could be persuaded by these offerings to intervene in the world of men. Dharma in the Rg Veda refers to ritual sacrifice—sacrifice as the power supporting the cosmos and sustaining life and, socio-economically, as the law men must act upon. Because it refers to something other than and in some sense beyond human beings, it is not anthropocentric. Yet as it largely involves a transaction between self and the world, it would not be inappropriate to call it an ethic of self-realization. To attain all this-worldly goods, ritual sacrifice must be performed and gods propitiated so that they can intervene in this world to facilitate self-realization.

Two interesting developments within this worldview must also be noted. First, sacrificial rituals increasingly became longer, elaborate and complicated, sometimes necessitating the simultaneous involvement of several Brahmanas. This meant the deployment of massive wealth to perform the ritual and to offer dakshinas (donation, fee or reward) to the Brahmanas. Second, as these rituals became more complex and expensive, they appeared to enhance the intrinsic worth of the ritual, as if a magical quality inhered in the sacrifice itself and its performance was sufficient to yield all goals of human flourishing. All attention began to be paid to the precision with which the elaborate ritual was performed, down to its minutest detail. The slightest deviation could result in the frustration of the desired objective. The more sacrifice was regarded as possessing a mystical potency superior even to the gods, the more the propitiation of gods became redundant or at best secondary. As Surendranath Dasgupta puts it, “If performed to

14 See Joel P Brereton, Dharman in the Rg Veda, Journal of Indian Philosophy, p.485. and Albrecht Wezler, Dharma in the Vedas and the Dharmasastras, Journal of Indian Philosophy, p 647.
15 See among others, S.M.Jamison and Michael Witzel, Vedic Hinduism, p4
perfection, it was capable of fulfilling the desired objective independent even of the gods.” 16

Another question to be addressed is this: how must we reconcile the assertion that the entire purpose of sacrifice was for this-worldly human flourishing with the claim that one of the purposes of rituals was to yield benefits beyond this life and that the world was not only for humans but also included gods? A couple of points should help resolve this apparent contradiction. First, a distinction between the terrestrial and the celestial is compatible with both spheres existing in the same cosmos. Gods were immortal and moved constantly between the terrestrial and the celestial but this mobility was very much a part of this cosmic world, quite like movement of birds and planes no matter how high they soar is a part of the same world. Second, the cessation of life on earth meant a flight to another loka – swargaloka, or Narkaloka depending upon the quantum of spiritual merit acquired. 17 However these lokas too were a part of the same cosmos, not radically other-worldly. Some of them were inhabited by gods, some by demons and others by ancestral spirits. Life after death was life in another of these lokas, very much in this cosmic world conceived more widely. Indeed, there is more than a hint in several texts of that period where amratva (immortality) means simply the endless duration of one’s life in this world of sensuous enjoyment, a notion far closer to samsara than to anything resembling Moksa.

We already have here indications of several sources of potential conflict between followers of different weltanschauungs as well as among those with a similar worldview: first, an internal conflict within followers Vedic teachings, between those who indulged in expensive and elaborate rituals and those who found this baroque quality entirely unnecessary, wasteful, and distracting from ones primary objectives. Second, between those who believed in the necessity of propitiating gods and those who gradually moved

16 Surendranath Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, 1963, p.21

17 Monier Williams Sanskrit-English dictionary has a long discussion. Among other things, he speaks of ‘seven worlds described as earth, sky, heaven, middle region, place of re-births, mansion of the blessed, and the abode of truth.”
away from this view and felt that the only significant action (*karma*) was the sacrifice (*yajna*) itself.

A third conflict also existed. Several commentators attest to the presence of pre-Aryan people in India. One such group were probably called Munis, a wandering group of sparsely clad ascetics, deeply skeptical about the idea of a creator of the universe, believing that the world in which they lived was real and that salvation in this world was possible by exacting practical discipline. They were generally pessimistic about other forms of liberation in this world and had little conception of any other world. The Munis are infrequently mentioned in the Vedas, but that is probably due to their radical difference with the Vedic tradition and their consequent marginalization. It does not mean that their existence in this period was rare. Thus, a third major conflict existed between the Vedics and the pre-Vedic Munis, one ritualistic, believers in gods, seeking this-worldly goods and pleasures, and very largely materialist, the other renouncing the world of this-worldly pleasures and rituals, rejecting beliefs in gods and seeking liberation deep in the forests through rigorous practical discipline.

IV

THE BACKGROUND: CONFLICT BETWEEN PRE-AXIAL AND AXIAL RELIGIONS

I believe we now possess a richer understanding of the background to Asoka’s Dhamma but are still nowhere near capturing the deeper and perhaps more central conflicts of that

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18 See G. C. Pande, *Studies in the Origins of Buddhism*, Motilal Benares Dass, 1957, 1995, 257-62. Also see Edward Fitz Patrick Crangle, *The Origin and Development of Early Indian Contemplative Practices*, Harrassowitz Verlag, Weisbaden, 1994, p28. Crangle says Early Vedic practices involve, by and large, a worldly attitude whereby the worshipper seeks to appease gods by performing various ritual sacrificial ceremonies. The *Rg Veda*, however, mentions some opposed to Aryan rituals... These were unbelievers, riteless people... Outstanding in this regard were the Munis. The *Rg Vedas* offer the earliest literary evidence for the existence of Munis’

19 D. D. Kosambi also mentions the existence of non-Aryan people called nagas who were settled in parts of what now are Bihar and UP. They did not speak the Aryan language and appeared not to have any contact with the Aryans. This appears to confirm G. C. Pande’s claim that a group of wandering ascetics called Munis, marginal to Vedic life, also existed in the region.
period. A new cosmology born out of the confluence of existing Vedic and pre-Vedic traditions but radically opposed to them illustrates the first of these.\textsuperscript{20}

The key difference lies in the birth of the idea of radical transcendence and therefore of a duality between this world (samsara) and Brahman or Atman, the ultimate reality pervading the whole universe or our deepest inner, imperishable selves. Samsara is radically separated from Brahmana or Atman in that the latter can be achieved only by totally negating the former. Liberation (moksha, mukti) from the cycle of samsara could be achieved only through jnana, knowledge which could not be obtained through mere intellectual exertion. Jnana was knowledge of an inner, intuitive, experiential kind that could only come upon the seeker as a sort of revelation that would transform him instantaneously. Against Vedic ritual sacrifice, we find in the Chhandogya Upanishad (3.8.11) Yagnavalkya tell Gargi that Moksha cannot be attained by performing sacrifices. But nor could Moksha be obtained, contra the Muni and early Jain tradition, by physical austerities even for thousands of years. Offerings (dana), sacrifices, recitations of Vedas, and performance of austerities may earn merit but only steadfastness in pursuit of the knowledge of Brahman would help us achieve Moksha or true immortality.\textsuperscript{21}

Both Brahman and Atman are wholly outside the given, immanent and mundane world (samsara) and manifest a point from which one can, to use Benjamin Shwartz's phrase, 'stand back and look beyond' and contemplate it. Hence the appropriateness of the term 'radical transcendence'. Hence also the aptness of the use of axiality. The Upanishads provide the axial turn in Indian civilization. Here we have the birth of a major potential conflict between vastly different weltanschauungs. For nothing that the vedic peoples or the munis think to be significant is truly or ultimately important for Upanishadic thinkers. Indeed, what is of great value to one worldview might be of least value to the other.

\textsuperscript{20} Dasgupta discusses the ways in which Asvaghosa reinterpreted the teachings of the Buddha by incorporating some of the Upanishadic ideas, but since his time is believed to be after the Mauryan empire, it is not of much relevance here, except for highlighting the fact that within Buddhism elements of Brahmanical thought were incorporated, and vice-versa.S.N.Dasgupta, op cit., pp.88-9

Nonetheless, there is one sense in which the break between the pre-Vedic / Vedic and the Upanishadic followers may not have been total. This has to do with the necessary place of others in an ethic of self-realization. What follows are very tentative remarks, the principal import of which is that higher order other-related values or principles (let's call this morality higher, separate and transcendental) are negligible or secondary in pre-Buddhist thought in the Indian subcontinent. Allow me to elaborate. For Vedic Brahmanism, Dharma has less to do with what we owe one another. Neither sacrificial rituals nor gods are invoked for the good of the generalized others, say for the Munis. In both its individual or collective forms, this is a self-focused ethic of fulfillment or realization. The content of this ethic does not change with the introduction of the idea of radical transcendence. The early moment of the axial turn in Indian civilization does not appear to make the generalized other central to its ethic of individual or collective self. To be sure, notions of justice, right and wrong exist, but these are probably in the hands of the Kshatriya king, matters decided in any given context by his will or judgment. Dharma in its Vedic or post-Vedic, Upanishadic senses has very little to do with what we must, by some transcendental necessity, owe one another.

All this begins to change with developments in later Upanishadic thought and more clearly with the Buddha. With Buddha's teachings, the transcendental point, to use Gananath Obeyesekhre's phrase is 'eticised' (in my terminology, one might say, moralized). From now on, judgments of the rightness or wrongness of action are 'mediated and delayed'. They may even be enunciated after one's death. This is the birth of transcendental morality- a transcendental evaluation of the rightness or wrongness of action in relation to others which affects a person's life not in this world alone but his destiny after death, outside this world. This also entails a shift in the meaning of Dharma. Dharma from now on also begins to mean this radically transcendental morality. Quite clearly, there must have been not only a conflict between ancient ethics and this new ethic inspired by Buddha but also a contest over the meaning of key terms, such as Dharma. We now have two radically differing notions of dharma, one a particular ethic of

22 Gananath Obeyesekhre, Imagining Karma, Princeton University Press,
a single-cosmos oriented (this-worldly) self-realization and the other, a transcendental
morality for all concerned with right inter-personal conduct. Indeed, even the term
'interpersonal' is not quite correct, because the conduct in question includes how human
beings behave towards non human animals. 'All' means all humans and animals, virtually
all living species. The protest over ritual sacrifice was perhaps more against the sacrificial
killings of animals. This made eminent economic sense but is not reducible to it. For the
kshatriyas, war had become a mode of life and perhaps the greatest benefit yielded by
yajna sacrifice was success in war. The kshatriyas needed animals that they stole from
ordinary pastoralists. War on the other hand meant not only the arbitrary killing of
humans and animals but also the destruction of people’s livelihood. Thus both
pastoralists and small farmers may have risen in protest against war and sacrificial
killing.  

Buddha's teachings thus instantiates a major transvaluation of Vedic values, a
'dynamic best captured in Assmann's notion of normative inversion whereby one group's
rights and responsibilities are turned by another group into prohibitions and scandals.'

A thicker description of the multiple sources of manifold conflicts in Asoka’s times is
now clearly available. In addition to the three conflicts mentioned in Section III, I have
provided in this section an account of at least two conflicts that probably go much deeper:
between pre-Vedic and Vedic immanentists on the one hand and transcendentalists who
developed the Upanishads and evolved the notion of the radical distinction between
Samsara and Brahman/Atman. A second even deeper conflict exists between two
different ethics, one Upanisadic, which has a transcendental metaphysics but no (or
perhaps a weak) conception of transcendental morality and the other which opposes
transcendental orders of the real outer or inner world but develops a strong idea of
transcendental morality that allows judgments from outside any this-worldly point on the
actions of every subject, both self- and other-related- i.e. related to ones kith and kin,
ones community (*jati*) and even those entirely outside one's fold. The social ramifications
of this conflict can hardly be overestimated.

23 “There were sound economic reasons for Asoka’s change to rule by morality, from the precepts of a book which not even its
greatest admirer could accuse of being moral.” Kosambi, p223.

24 See Pollock, op cit., p. 404.
I hope to have shown the deeply mistaken character of the view that religious interaction in Asoka's period of rule was relatively trouble-free and that he must have had an easy time finding a common ground among followers of different schools of thought. It is well known that shared philosophical and cultural assumptions provide no immunity against intense conflicts. The assumption that offshoots of an entity conflict weakly with their parent is even more untenable. Buddhism may have been an offshoot of 'Hinduism' but conflicted with it at many levels, on many issues. As for Jaina philosophy, it is not even entirely clear what epistemic gain ensues to see it simply as an offshoot of Hinduism. Thus, Vincent Smith and Radhakumud Mookerjee clearly underestimate the depth of conflict in Asokan times. Thapar and Bhandarkar are right that this was a period of intense and bitter sectarian conflict, however, in my view, even they are unable to home in on the novelty of what was at stake in Asoka's period. By vividly representing the central conflicts of those times, this account now gives an entirely different gloss on Romila Thapar's remarks that this is a period of intense sectarian struggles and to her claim that Sixth Century BCE was 'the century of universal questioning'.

It also helps us to see the real issues at stake in those struggles- a conflict between notions of weak and radical transcendence as well as between immanent and transcendental moralities. The Sixth century BCE must have been a century of massive intellectual and emotional turmoil with gigantic social implications, the like of which had never been witnessed earlier. It appears that the need of the times was a public or political morality- a clear statement of not only how we must treat ourselves (found in Brahmanical philosophies of that time), but also a firm and well-grounded statement on how we treat each other and all living creatures (not explicitly found in Brahmanical philosophy but found in Buddhism in a radically transcendent form, a transcendental morality) but one that could arbitrate between these multiple, radically different, often incommensurable rival conceptions so that each could coexist by discovering or evolving a morality that is learn from one another.

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26 Kosambi proposes that a number of sects with subtle metaphysical differences arose in protest against the “monstrous cancerous growth of sacrificial ritual in the tribal kingdoms.” The greatest fruit of the yajna sacrifice was success in war; fighting was glorified for its own sake as the natural mode of life for the ksatriyas, while the brahmin’s duty and means of livelihood was the performance of vedic sacrifices. [p.166]
V
THE REAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 7TH EDICT

I hope by now we also possess a much better understanding of what exactly is so novel about the harmless looking statement in the 7th edict. Given the many-layered, incrementally deep conflicts involving several different groups and the necessity imposed by trade and urban conditions for them to cohabit, Asoka had to evolve some way to hold them together. Buddha’s teachings had provided him with conceptual resources to imagine something that would be more than ad hoc and tactical, something long lasting and endorsable from within each pasanda's perspective. They had given him the hope in the development of public norms from below and the redundancy of orders from above. One of them was that all pasandas must dwell everywhere in his empire.

Among historians, only D.D.Kosambi appears to have grasped the true importance of this statement. Kosambi believes that the edict is meant to communicate primarily to leaders of each pasanda rather than directly to pasandas themselves. Through the 7th edict, Ashoka effectively grants these leaders permission to travel freely everywhere in the kingdom to provide them an opportunity to teach and convert each other. Asoka impartially grants this privilege to religious teachers of all pashandas. It is likely that the edict became necessary because mutual interaction and the attempt to preach one’s own ethics to others had begun to cause severe friction, leading to the birth of local rules forbidding one pashanda from communicating with or worse entering into the territory of another pashanda- something akin to what Sudipta Kaviraj in a different context has called back to back existence. Instead of perpetuating mutual exclusion and the resulting homogenization of each settlement, Ashoka, it seems, gives assurances to the leader of each pasanda that they must feel secure everywhere and encourages free interaction and dialogue amongst them, albeit now regulated by moral norms.

27 Sadly, this might have been the primary reason why his empire was so brief, ephemeral and anomalous. Equally, this surely is the only reason why Asoka's Dhamma continues to be remembered more than 2000 years later.
As mentioned above, he is able to do so by virtue of a major conceptual transformation, facilitated by a change in the background conditions, perhaps even in the social imaginary. A new form of society far more heterogeneous than the original simple tribe-community had come into being. Living together here was terribly different but at the same time no longer on optional extra but inevitable, a natural part of one’s environment. To respond to the crisis generated by radical heterogeneity, a new legitimating ethic had become necessary. Buddha’s teachings made possible a different conception of Dharma. It needed a great leap of imagination to arrive at the view that what we call dharma can be used not only for personal self fulfillment or the fulfillment of the needs of specific groups but rather to ease the newly emergent problems of a new form of society that simply could not do without diverse groups. It is a discovery of the first magnitude that dharma or religion can be used to ease the difficulties of early society, to make the common life of diverse elements of society easier. It necessitated that a collective ethic substitute correct ritual by good deeds for the sake of others.

Moreover, Buddha’s teachings opened up the possibility of the radical socio-political restructuring of the world and the self by politico-moral action from above. Buddha’s ethic included the pivotal importance of moral action. Once one stands outside the whole cosmos and is able to see its limitations, and once the transcendental point from which one examines the cosmos is viewed as emanating a moral vision, it becomes possible to imagine a profound restructuring of society and polity in accordance with that vision. Once again, D.D. Kosambi is imaginatively on to this point when he says that more than a personal conversion of the emperor, there appears to have taken place in Ashokan times a deeper conversion of the whole previous state apparatus. The king not only preaches a new morality but is able to launch radically new political and administrative measures that includes public morality as an essential ingredient, and provides a framework within which radically differing ethics can coexist and nourish one another. 28

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28 Kosambi p around 200. Finally the rules governing ordinary people and the ruler himself stemmed from the same moral source. This was quite unlike the statecraft recommended by Chanakya where an entirely amoral ruler committing all kinds of crimes against subjects and neighbours reigned over a morally regulated population.
Also emerging at this time in India is the idea of the Cakravartin, the wheel turner. The wheel that these great rulers turn is the wheel of *Dharma*. Whereas the Buddha turned the wheel of the *Dharma* in the religious sphere, the Cakravartin turns it in the political sphere. The *cakravartin* conquers other kingdoms not by physical force but by moral appeal. Wherever he travels he is welcomed and people voluntarily submit to his rule out of respect for his adherence to the principles of *Dharma*. The cakravartin represents the Buddhist political ideal of the just ruler or universal monarch who brings peace and prosperity to his subjects. The normative king, it seems is intrinsic to the social and moral order of the world.

Given the birth of the idea of a moral ruler or the 'normative king', a third interpretation of the statement in the 7th edict is also possible. Here the focus is less on what leaders or followers do to one another and more on the relationship between the king and pasandas. It is safe to assume that throughout the pre-Asokan period, the king could expel *brahmanas* and *sramanas* from his territorial domain. Through the 7th edict, Asoka attempted to prevent this. Given that right and wrong actions were determined by the king himself, there must have been arbitrary exercise of power. The law must not have been applied in a consistent or legitimate manner but in a highly personal and arbitrary one. Thus *rajas* are often depicted as rewarding or punishing according to the way their personal interests were served. Thus, the 7th edict was an attempt to tame the institution of kingship and to contain the absolute exercise of power by the application of the principle of *dhamma*. Indeed, the reconceptualization of *dhamma* may also be viewed as an attempt to transform power into authority by infusing it with certain norms. *Dhamma* was an immutable moral principle which was above the king, the *raja* of the *raja*.

VI

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29 The reference to conquerers by physical force is to those who perform the Brahmanical *asvamedha* rite. In contrast to the *asvemedha*, rival kings welcome and submit to the chakravartin and ask him to teach them (*anusasa maharajati*).
30 *ibid.*, p.274.
31 *ibid.*, p.167
32 *Samyutta Nikaya*, III, pp.301-3
SEARCH FOR A COMMON GROUND

What, despite profound differences in world-views, could the basis of such co-existence be? For a start, the possibility of coexistence depended on toleration, the capacity to put up with the practices of others despite deep moral disagreement. Better still, it needed mutual adjustment and accommodation. Vedic, Brahmanical ethics needed to be moralized, to some degree; The shramanic world view, the world view of Buddhists, Nirgranthis, and Ajivikas needed to accept some value in rituals and rites. This could hardly have been easy, given the shramanic contempt for rituals and the brahmanic distaste for anti-ritualistic, transcendental morality. The edicts encourage partial reconciliation. Edict IX notes that rituals and ceremonies play an important role in the daily lives of people. They are also significant on occasions of birth or marriage of sons and daughters, journey, sickness, and death.

This concession to rituals is subtly though not totally offset by welfare measures mentioned in the edicts, presumably something all good kings must undertake. Asoka speaks of the importance of planting banyan and mango trees, digging water wells, building rest houses, and securing varieties of medicinal herbs, hinting that it is the duty of the king to provide a healthy life and physical comfort to his subjects. Thus In the Major Rock Edict II, he says, ‘Medicinal Herbs suitable for men and animals have been imported and planted wherever they were previously not available. Also, where roots and fruits were lacking, they have been imported and planted. Wells have been dug and trees planted along roads for the use of men and animals. This is echoed elsewhere in Buddhist texts. ‘After the cakkavatti had brought the entire universe under his umbrella, he must proceed to ensure that his people live in comparative comfort, in a world where destitution has been wiped out. Instead of only punishing offenders, which would merely ensure the stability of the social order but not make for moral order, the normative king first had to provide the poor and deprived with the essentials of existence.’

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33 See for instance, Major Rock edict IX
34 See, Major Rock Edict II –and Pillar edict VII
35 ibid., p.165.
dhammiko dhammaraja must not merely be concerned with upholding the property and family rights of people in society but go beyond these minimum obligations and also ensure that everyone’s basic needs are met.  

Several edicts mention, however, the limited value of rituals and ceremonies. In rock edict IX he says, “It is right that ceremonies are performed but this kind bears little fruit and are of ‘doubtful value’ The only ceremonies really worth performing are Dhamma-related, i.e. those good deeds that concern others. These are proper treatment of slaves and employees restraint of violence towards living creatures, reverence to teachers and liberality to brahman and sramana ascetics- the ceremonies of Dhamma, the Dharmamangalas. More importantly, rituals do not address one of the most burning moral issues of the times: Inter-Pasandic disagreement and conflict. Hence, Edict 12 says, "The beloved of the Gods does not wish to overvalue gifs and sacrifice. More important than these is the reverence one's faith commands or the number of its followers or its core ethical values. Even more important than these ethical values are the essentials of all faiths and pasandas. It is these essentials that constitute the common ground of these seemingly conflicting conceptions. “

What then is the common ground among rival conceptions? For Asoka, Dhamma constitutes the all-important common ground, the essentials, of all pasandas. What then are these essentials? Interpreters here give differing answers: Dhamma is sometimes seen as virtue, religious truth or simply piety. But the most convincing answer, consistent with what is mentioned above and provided by Obeyesekre and Tambiah is that Dhamma is

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37 The ideal king Maha Sudassana, for instance, establishes a perpetual grant (evarupang danang patthapeyyang) to provide food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, gold for the poor, money for those in want, as well as wives for those who required them [Digha Nikaya, II, p.137; Dialogues of the Buddha, II, p.211]. This dhammiko dhammaraja “patronizes samanas and brahmanas who are worthy, providing them with all the things necessary to pursue their goals [Digha Nikaya, II, p.141; Dialogues of the Buddha, II, p.217].
39 Rock edict IX, ibid., p44.
40 See Zimmer ‘Asoka, rather than trying to uphold one view or the other –and thereby identifying himself with one school or the other – sought to emphasise what he held to be the ‘essence’ common to all sects and schools. Doing otherwise would have been to encourage a more vociferous conflict of ideas and practices among these sects and schools, thereby compromising the concord and cohesion he was trying to build up within his kingdom.
akin to transcendental morality. If so, it is fair to say that for Asoka, rites and rituals have no meaning unless embedded within an ethical perspective and the ethical import of these gifts is overridden by their lack of moral significance. This is why they may be offered only as long as they are not injurious to anyone (humans as well as non-humans). No animal may be killed in order to be sacrificed. Nor should there be any samaja (assembly) for such a purpose, implying that other kinds of assemblies, especially the Sangha, are permissible.  

What then is the content of dhamma? The fundamental principle of dhamma is *vacaguti*, variously interpreted as restraint on speech or control on tongue. It is significant that the edicts recommend that there be restraint on speech but have little to say on restraining actions. It is almost as if the spoken word is not only more important than the written word but also more significant than physical action. Here again, it is crucial to retrieve the surrounding context of Asokan edicts.

**VII**

**THE 12TH EDICT: RESTRAINT ON SPEECH**

We can't recover that world but we can imagine one where virtually nothing is written or read. Writing and reading have not yet taken possession of our psyche.  

Speech has no visual presence; it can’t be seen. Every word is spoken. Language is rooted and resides almost entirely in sound. Text, meaning something strung together, is also only spoken and heard. Everything is thought aloud and communicated. The spoken word carries the entire burden of our emotional life, all that uplifts or gets us down, brings us together or  

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41 Rock Edict, XII in N.A. Nikam and Richard McKeon, The Edicts of Asoka, Chicago University Press, 1962,  
42 This is denied by many scholars who wrote early in the 20th century. Mookerjee writes that literature and culture seem to have filtered down to the masses so as to produce a comparatively large percentage of literacy. R.K.Mookerjee, *Asoka*, McMillan, 1928, p 102. Vincent Smith points out that the existence of edicts in the vernacular shows mass literacy. *Vincent Smith, Asoka, The Buddhist King*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1920, p. 139. Such views are naive. The epigraphic habit had barely begun to form in Asoka's time. The rulers had begun to play with the new technology, no doubt. Asoka can even be credited for having realised the enormous future potential of writing and to have been among the first to have used it for dissemination and 'moral conquest'. But mass literacy at that time is inconceivable, because there was little need for it. Besides, a large heterogeneous empire dictated that edicts be written in different languages. Nothing about wide spread literacy can be inferred from it. To say that the edicts were written in the vernacular would entail that Greek and Aramaic were vernacular languages, which is absurd. It is best to go along with Stanley Tambiah on this issue. He writes, 'The intellectual milieu in which early science and philosophy advanced was essentially oral, small scale and face to face. If this was true of early Greece, it was emphatically true of India in the Axial Age. See Stanley Tambiah, Reflexive and institutional achievements of early Buddhism in... p 461.
pulls us apart. The entire complex of Art, Philosophy, and ‘Religion’- poetry, our deepest metaphysical thoughts, acts to honour gods and goddesses are all spoken, recited, sung, chanted and heard. All these are composed, transmitted, stored, reproduced and enriched orally. One might even say then that life itself is lived in sound. And, perhaps, destroyed in sound too.

Not only life but also public life is lived and extinguished in sound. Indeed, the public domain is constituted almost entirely by the spoken word and can therefore be disassembled by it too. After all, when words flow off the tongue effortlessly, they also tumble out inadvertently and what is worse, carelessly. But then, words that matter must be enunciated with great care, even greater thought, for once uttered they can’t be withdrawn. It is important in such cultures to differentiate such unguarded speech from one that carries weight or is valued. If they are to perform all the functions that the written word serves for us now, such treasures must be stored and remembered in memorable forms. To be remembered without being written and to be effective, this speech must be crafted with great economy, and be crisp, rhythmic and rendered with great power. Only thus will it transform into a powerful mode of action. Words in oral cultures have always had enormous power. They can beckon gods to help us tide over problems, create something out of nothing, empower or disempower others, turn them into stone, even kill them. Words can be weapons or an elixir. They can soothe or cause grievous hurt. In oral cultures, words have magical potency.

One can hardly overestimate the immediacy and vibrancy of social interaction and, more pertinently, the agonistic energies in predominantly oral societies and its publics. Verbal duels, speech fights, word-wars, verbal tongue lashing of adversaries in intellectual combats- all these are commonly found in societies largely unaffected by writing. Moreover, vitriolic reciprocal name-calling exists frequently with fulsome expression of self-praise and excessive bragging about one’s own prowess.

Given this context, one can now understand why oral speech acts appear to have more weight than all other forms of action. It is almost as if the greatest harm that might be inflicted on the other is through speech rather than physical action. It is not clear from the
edict what the level of physical violence in that society was, if social interaction was already civil enough for people to even conceive that they could injure or kill one another over philosophical or religious differences. At any rate either “hate speech” was considerably more significant than physical violence or else physical violence was largely confined to the territorial aggression and politics among the kshatriyas. Quite certainly the antagonistic energy in speech was unmatched even by physical violence. Generally people knew how to do things with spoken words. They poked fun, ridiculed, abused, cursed, mocked, scoffed at, were satirical and sarcastic, belittled and humiliated others – all by subtle manipulation of the spoken word.

Madhav Deshpande provides an extremely interesting example of the oral skills of ancient Indians. The term “devanaampriya” literally means beloved of the gods. In the edicts the word is used extensively as an honorific adjective for emperor Ashoka. This is a bit odd because the edicts were written after Ashoka had turned Buddhist and in this early period of Buddhism, the existence of gods was frequently denied. The Vedics frequently refer to followers of Buddhism and Jainism as devadvis, i.e. haters of god. Deshpande recounts an interesting passage from the Skanda Purana in which Vishnu is reincarnated as Buddha in order to first lure the asura Mauryans. The shudras, Vedics believed, had wrongly usurped the rule of the earth into abandoning the vedic dharma, making sacrifices redundant and denying the existence of gods and then destroying them in a battle between devas and asuras. In a battle between good and evil, the real lovers of the gods, the vedic people had to defeat all those who were haters of gods. In short, devanaampriya could be used as an honorific title only for vedic kings. How then could Ashoka, a ruler who was not from the kshatriya caste and who is widely believed to deny the existence of gods refer to himself as devanaampriya? From Ashoka’s point of view to follow his ancestors in using this term was perfectly valid politically and morally. He wished to support and get support from all pashandas, not only from the fellow-Buddhists, Ajivikas and Nirgranthis but also from followers of vedic dharma, those who believed in gods and in the value of ritual sacrifice for their propitiation. But from the vedic point of view this usage must have been entirely inappropriate. However, instead of

43 Madhav Deshpande, in Patrick Olivelle, Asoka,
trying to reappropriate this term the vedics began to use it as a term of abuse and contempt. Even Upanashadic philosophers might have used the term in the same manner, implying a fool (Moorkha), i.e. devoid of the knowledge of the Brahma. Devanaampriya became a synonym of devadvis. Devanaampriya now begins to have a negative valance because a once positive term is being used sarcastically. In short, they fiercely contested the legitimacy of Asoka's use of the term for himself by first disassociating, then renouncing, and finally denouncing the term.

VIII

TWO FORMS OF SELF-RESTRAINT

We do not have much evidence of the verbal battles and hate speech of that period but the edicts imply that verbal wars in that period were intense and brutal. They simply had to be reined in. But what kind of speech must be curbed? Edict XII says that speech that without reason disparages other pasandas must be restrained. Speech critical of others may be freely enunciated only if we have good reasons to do so. However, even when we have good reasons to be critical, one may do so only on appropriate occasions and even when the occasion is appropriate, one must never be immoderate. Critique should never belittle or humiliate others. Thus, there is a multi-layered, ever deepening restraint on one's verbal speech against others. Let us call it other-related self-restraint. However, the edicts do not stop at this. They go on to say that one must not extols one's own pasanada without good reason. Undue praise of one's own pasanda is as morally objectionable as unmerited criticism of the faith of others. Moreover, the edicts add that even when there is good reason to praise one's own pasanda, it too should be done only on appropriate occasions and even on those occasions, never immoderately. Undue or excessive self-glorification is also a way to make others feel small. For Asoka, blaming other pasandas out of devotion to one's own pasandas and unreflective, uncritical, effulgent self-praise can only damage one's pasanda. By offending and thereby estranging

44 ‘There should not be condemnation of others without any ground. Such slighting (lahuka, from laghu) should be for specified grounds only”. See R.K.Mookerjee, Asoka, p 159.
others, it undermines one's capacity for mutual interaction and possible influence. Thus, there must equally be multi-textured, ever deepening restraint for oneself. Let this be *self-related self-restraint*.

Elsewhere, in the 7th edict, Asoka emphasizes the need not only for self-restraint, samyama but also bhaav shuddhi, again a self-oriented act. Bhaavashuddhi is frequently interpreted as self-purification, purity of mind. However, this term is ambiguous between self-purification within an ethic of individual self-realization or one that at least includes cleansing one's self of ill-will towards others. My own view is that in the context of the relevant edicts, the moral feeling of good will towards others or at least an absence of ill will towards others must be a constitutive feature of what is meant by bhaavshuddhi, a crucial part of the more general purification of bhaava. Self-restraint and self-purification are not just matters of etiquette or prudence. They have moral significance.

Given all this, and in order to advance mutual understanding and mutual appreciation, it is better, the edict says, to have samovaya, conourse. an assembly of pashandas where they can hear one another out, communicate with one another. They may then become bahushruta, i.e. one who listens to all, the perfect listener, and open-minded. This way they will not only have atma pasanda vraddhi, the growth in the self-understanding of one's own pasanda but also the growth of the essentials of all (saravadhi or saaravraddhi) The edicts here imply that the ethical self-understanding of pasandas is not static but constantly evolving and such growth is crucially dependent on mutual communication and dialogue with one another. Blaming others without good reason or immoderately disrupts this process and, apart from damaging dhamma, diminishes mutual growth of individual pasandas.

The edicts add that no matter how generous you are with gifts and how sincere your devotion to rituals, if you lack samyama, bhaavshuddhi and the quality of bahushruta, then all the liberality in the world is in vain. Conversely, one who is unable to offer gifts but possess the aforementioned virtues lives a dhammic life. Thus, one whose speech
disrespects no one, who has no ill will towards others and who does no violence to living beings is truly dharmic. Dharma is realized not by sacrifice but by right speech and conduct.

IX

IS THIS TOLERATION?

Thapar says, "the 7th edict is pleading for toleration among all sects'. Likewise, the term 'religious tolerance' is also used by Tambiah. Is the term 'toleration' or tolerance appropriate in this context? In the classical 17th century meaning of the term, to tolerate is to refrain from interference in the activities of others even though one finds them morally disagreeable, even repugnant and despite the fact that one has the power to do so. Here one puts up with, even suffers the morally reprehensible activities of others. The powerless other escapes interference of the powerful because the latter shows mercy towards them, a virtue in the powerful exercised in relation to those who do not really deserve it. Lets call this a hierarchical notion of toleration, given the asymmetry of power between the two groups and the attitude of superiority that one has towards the other. A second conception exists: Two groups, equally powerful, may also tolerate one another. Each has power to interfere in the activities of others and each finds the other morally repugnant but both refrain from doing so because the mutual costs are too high. This is modus vivendi toleration. Clearly the Asokan case does not fall within either of these two conceptions.

A third conception is also non-hierarchical. Here A and B refrain from interfering in each other's activities out of indifference and because they don't particularly believe that one is more powerful than the other. True, they do not heartily approve of each other. The acceptance of one another may be somewhat grudging, more out of resignation than enthusiasm. It may also be true that this new disposition is a result of the dilution of the

45 Romila Thapar, Asoka and the decline of the Mauryas, OUP, Oxford, 1961, p139
46 Stanley Tambiah, World Conquerer and World Renouncer, CUP, Cambridge, p64
47 See for example, Susan Mendus, Toleration and the limits of Liberalism,
perceived power of the larger group, softened by the force of principles or reason or commerce or due to the disuse of collective power in matters concerning ultimate ideals. Neither really cares for another, as long each keeps out of the other's way. This is live and let live attitude, one that is found in post-industrial, individualist, liberal societies. Everyone, in this conception, has a right to be, as long as he or she causes no harm to others. I may disapprove of what you do but as long you do it in your privacy and not in my face, I don't really care. The Asokan case does not fall under this conception either. If none of these conceptions is able to cover the Asokan case, then why use the term?

The basic idea of toleration is that A does not accept B's views or practices but still refrains from interfering in it, even though one has the power to do so. A fourth conception may not violate this basic idea and yet be distinct from the other three conceptions. Parents often put up with the blemishes of their children which they would not suffer in others. We choose to overlook a fault in our lover, even in our close friends that we would not excuse in others. We might endure deep difference in world views in fellow citizens because we value fraternity. In all such cases, we put up with dislikeable states of doing or being in others even if we have some power to do something about them simply because we have love or love-like feelings for them. Here one tolerates not despite hate but rather because one loves the other. A mixture of love, friendliness and fellow-feeling is in the background or becomes the ground of a different conception of toleration.

Unlike other conceptions which presupposes the idea that oneness with significant others as well as God is achieved by abolishing/ignoring/belittling the radical other, i.e. by eliminating plurality, here, in the second conception, oneness is attained by accepting all radical others as equally significant because they variously manifest one supreme being or concept. Thus to tolerate is to refrain from interfering in the life of others not despite our hatred for them, nor because we are indifferent to them but because we love them as alternative manifestations of our own selves or deeply care for some basic norm common to all of us. We may not be able to do or be what they are, we may even dislike some of their beliefs and practices but we recognize that they are translations of our own
selves or of gods within each of us. This binds us together in a relationship of lasting affection.

So suppose that A accepts the value of many but not all of B's beliefs and practices but recognizes that beliefs and practices he does not accept follow from some of those he does or that some beliefs and practices he is unable to endorse follow inescapably from B's different background, then out of respect for some of his beliefs and practices, A would put up rather than interfere with those with which he disagrees. Asoka's views, I believe to have shown, fall broadly within this fourth conception. If so, one might use the term 'toleration' in this context, as long as one is careful not to confuse it with the other three, more standard conceptions.

But in the end it is perhaps better to avoid using the term 'toleration'. No matter what its surrounding context, toleration focuses solely on a set of other-related self-restraints. But Asokan edicts clearly go beyond this by also making it necessary to observe a set of self-related self-restraints. In mutual toleration, each observes identical forms of self-restraint: I don't interfere in your beliefs and practices and you don't in mine. But the edicts speak instead of what we might call correlative self-restraints. One is not asked to refrain from excessively criticizing others and one self. Instead, one is asked not to immoderately and without good reason be critical of others or indulge in the correlative practice of self-praise, quite a different thing altogether. It is by simultaneously observing both forms of self-restraint that one completes a moral act. It is better to say then that the edicts outline original norms of civility and principled coexistence among radically differing Pasandas in a deeply heterogeneous society.

The distinction between the two forms of self-restraint is important because it helps us to more clearly see why Asoka's political morality is not reducible to but goes beyond toleration in every sense of the term. An example here from our own time might illustrate my point. India is a country where a majority of its people either call themselves or are taken to be Hindus. Though not entirely, the ethos of many of India's social and political institutions is saturated by one or the other strand of 'Hinduism'. So, regardless of our
evaluative judgment, it would not be entirely incorrect to say these institutions are somewhat Hinduised or wear a Hindu look. Yet, India also has Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, atheists and people with many other not so easily definable outlooks. Sections of Hindus may find their practices disagreeable, morally discomforting, or just downright strange but they tolerate them. They may collectively have power to interfere in them, even banish them, but they refrain from doing so. Indeed, legally they have no other option. These religious communities have rights not to be interfered with in their religious and cultural practices. But the minorities will not be able to effectively exercise their rights, if Hindus do not possess the capacity for other-related self-restraint. Most Hindus do as a matter of fact exercise such restraint. But is this sufficient for a morally justified co-existence between Hindus and minority communities? Suppose then that community-specific rights of minorities are respected but Hindu self-assertion becomes more pronounced. Let us say they build new temples around every corner, ensure that these are mightier in size than mosques and churches, fund new radio and television channels that stream Hindu teachings and no other, introduce text books that speak largely of and glorify Hindu gods and goddesses, change national and state symbols in order to make them explicitly and exclusively Hindu and so on. What would its impact be on the psyche of the minorities? Most likely, it will increase their sense of social and cultural alienation. It will force them to feel left out of many public domains. It might even lower their self-esteem. Alternatively, Hindus can show some self-related self-restraint, so as not to show off, to not always wear their religion and culture on their sleeve, to not always advertize their wares, as it were. Indeed, to persistently announce in public than you are the boss in your own country might be a sure sign of deep rooted insecurities and anxieties, one that is both potentially damaging to others and to oneself. Abandoning this self-related self-restraint might then adversely affect everyone, destroy the very fabric of contemporary Indian society.

CONCLUSION
I have argued that Asoka's conception and policy of Dhamma can not be properly understood unless we vividly imagine the background conditions within which it emerged. The ambition of a new public morality widely endorsed by all affected groups could not have been possible without the pressing need to come up with a novel initiative in conditions of acute conflict among rival world views. At the centre of these struggles were bitter disputations between predominantly one-world oriented practitioners of ritual sacrifice and those who opposed such violent rituals and sought a new transcendent, world-negating morality for all. The availability of new conceptual resources forged during these disputes made it possible to devise a new policy that, though not guaranteed to succeed, gave the hope for a durable principled coexistence between groups engaged in fierce verbal disputes. This new political morality placed at the centre a series of self and other-related self-restraints. Only the simultaneous exercise of these new voluntary constraints could ensure amicable collective living. This policy might be called 'toleration' but only by a massive change in its dominant meaning. On standard interpretations, toleration involves the privatization of ill will or hatred. Both must be neutralized if not expunged. However, this new notion implies no such thing. Quite the contrary, for it presupposes in the background something closer to good will and respect. But in the end, even this might not be appropriate. Till we discover a suitable prakrit, pali or sanskrit term, it is best to call it civil.

APPENDIX

The Major Rock edicts VII and XII

Edict VII

King Priyadarshin, Beloved of the Gods, wishes that all sects may dwell at all places because they all desire self-restraint and purification. People, however, are of various likings and various attachments. They will perform either the whole or a part (of their
duty). But he is certainly low man who has no self-restraint, purity of heart (gratitude and steadfast devotion), though he may have lavish liberality. (tr. D.R.Bhandarkar, p292)

His Sacred and Gracious majesty desires that in all places should reside people of diverse sects (pasandas). For they all desire restraint of passions and purity of heart. But men are of various inclinations and of various passions. They may thus perform the whole or a part (of their duties). But of him whose liberality is, too, not great, restraint of passion, inner purity, gratitude and constancy of devotion should be indispensable and commendable’ (tr Radha Kumud Mookerjee, pp. 149-50)

The Beloved of the gods, the king Piyadassi, wishes that all sects may dwell in all places, for all seek self-control and purity of mind. But men have varying desires and varying passions. They will either practice all that is required or else only a part. But even he who is generous, yet has no self control, purity of mind, gratitude and firm faith, is regarded as mean. (Romila Thapar, p. 253.)

King Priyadarsi wishes members of all faiths to live everywhere in his kingdom. For they all seek mastery of the senses and purity of mind. Men are different in their inclinations and passions, however, and they may perform the whole of their duties or only part. Even if one is not able to make lavish gifts, mastery of the senses, purity of mind, gratitude and steadfast devotion are commendable and essential. (tr. N.A.Nikam and Richard McKeon p49)

**Edict XII**

King Priyadarshin, beloved of the gods honours men of all sects, ascetics and householders, with gift and manifold honour. But the Beloved of the gods does not so much think of gift and honour as that there should be a growth of the essentials among (men of) all sects. The growth of essentials, however, is of various kinds. But the root of it is restraint of speech—how?—namely, there ought not to be any honour to one’s own sect or condemnation of another’s sect without any occasion, or any depreciation of the latter
on this and that occasion. On the contrary, others’ sects should be honoured on this or that occasion. By doing so one exalts one’s own sect, and does service to the other sects. By doing otherwise one injures one’s own sect and also harms another sect. For one who does honour to one’s own sect and condemns another’s sect, all through attachment to one’s own sect in order that one may render one’s sect effulgent, in reality by so doing injures severely one’s own sect. Concourse, therefore, is commendable in order that they may hear and desire to hear one another’s Dharma. For this is the desire of the Beloved of the gods that all sects should be well-informed and conducive of good. And those who are favourably disposed towards this or that sect should be informed: “The Beloved of the gods does not much think of gift or honour as that there may be a growth of the essential among all sects and also mutual appreciation”. For this end are engaged the Dharma-Mahamatras, Superintendent of women, the Vrajabhumikas and other bodies of officials. And this is its fruit, the exaltation of one’s own sect and the illumination of Dharma. (Tr D.R.Bhandarkar, pp 298-99)

His sacred and gracious majesty is honouring all sects, both ascetics and householders; by gifts and offerings of various kinds is he honouring them. But his sacred majesty does not value such gifts or honours as that there should be the growth of the essential elements of all religious sects. The growth of this genuine matter is, however, of many kinds, But the root of it is restraint of speech, that is, that there should not be honour of one’s own sect and condemnation of others’ sect without any ground. Such slighting should be for specified grounds only. On the other hand, the sects of others should be honoured for this ground or that. Thus doing, one helps his own sect to grow and benefits the sects of others, too. Doing otherwise, on hurts his own sect and injures the sects of others. For whosoever honours his own sect and condemns the sects of others wholly from devotion to his own sect, i.e the thought “How I may glorify my own sect” and acting thus injures more gravely his own sect on the contrary. Hence concord alone is commendable, in this sense that all should listen and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others. This is, in fact, the desire of His Sacred Majesty, viz., that all sects should be possessed of wide learning and good doctrines. And those who are content in their respective faiths, should all be told that His Sacred Majesty does not value so much
gift or external honour as that there should be the growth of the essential elements, and
breadth, of all sects. (tr Radha Kumud Mookerjee, pp 158-160)

King Priyadarsi honours men of all faiths, members of religious orders and laymen alike,
with gifts and various marks of esteem. Yet he does not value either gifts or honours as
much as growth in the qualities essential to men of all faiths.
This growth could take many forms, but its root is in guarding one’s speech to avoid
extolling one’s own faith and disparaging the faith of others improperly or when the
occasion is appropriate, immoderately.
The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honouring
them, one exalts one’s own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of
others. By acting otherwise, one injures one’s own faith and also does disservice to that
of others. For if a man extols his own faith and disparages Another because of devotion
to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith.
Therefore concord alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and
respect the conception of Dharma accepted by others.
King Priyadarsi desires men of all faiths to know each other’s doctrines and to acquire
sound doctrines. Those who are attached to their particular faiths should be told that King
Priyadarsi does not value gifts and hours as much as the growth in the qualities essential
to religion in men of all faiths.
Many officials are assigned to tasks bearing on this purpose- the officers in charge of
spreading Dharma, the superintendents of women in the royal household, the inspectors
of cattle and pasture lands, and other officials.
The objective of these measures is the promotion of each man’s particular faith and the
glorification of Dharma. (tr. N.A.Nikam and Richard McKeon, pp58-9)
The Beloved of the gods, the king Piyadassi, honours all sects and both ascetics and
householders, with gifts and various forms of recognition. But the Beloved of the gods
does not consider gifts and honours to be as important as the advancement of the essential
doctrines of all sects. The progress of the essential doctrines takes many forms, but its
basis is the control of one’s speech, so as not to extol one’s own sect or disparage
another’s on unsuitable occasions, or at least to do so only mildly on suitable occasions.
On each occasion, one should honour another’s sect for by doing so one increases the influence of one’s sect and benefits that of another man.; while by doing otherwise one diminishes the influence of one’s own sect and harms the other man’s. Again, whosoever honours his own sect or disparages that of another man, wholly out of devotion to his own, with a view to showing it in favourable light, harms his own sect even more seriously. Therefore, concord alone is to be commended, so that men may hear one another’s principles and obey them. This is the desire of the Beloved of the gods, that all sects should be well-informed and should teach that which is good, and that everywhere their adherents should be told, “The Beloved of the gods does not consider gifts or honour to be as important as the progress of the essential doctrines of all sects.” Many are concerned with this matter—the officer of Dharma, the women’s officers, the managers of state farms and other classes of officers. The result of this is the increased influence of one’s own sect and glory to Dhamma. (tr Romila Thapar, p255)

Aspka's dhamma is not transcendental! incorporate this point