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EDICTS AND EMPIRE: COMMUNICATION, LOCALISATION, AND CONTROL IN ASHOKA'S MAURYAN STATE, 268–232 BCE

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Abstract

The Ashokan edicts are the earliest surviving corpus of state communication in South Asia. This paper analyses their distribution, language, and textual variation to reconstruct how the Mauryan empire governed through inscriptions. Mapping 33 sites from Kandahar to Sannati, the study shows that Major Rock Edicts cluster on trade routes and frontiers, while Pillar Edicts mark the Ganga valley heartland. Linguistic analysis reveals Prakrit in most regions, Greek and Aramaic at Kandahar, and local script variants, indicating deliberate localisation. Textual collation of Girnar, Kalsi, Shahbazgarhi, and Dhauli versions of Rock Edict 13 shows consistent policy but varied phrasing, suggesting central drafting with regional scribal adaptation. The Kalinga Separate Edicts appear only at Dhauli and Jaugada, proving targeted messaging for a conquered province. Three case notes examine communication strategy. The Kandahar Bilingual Edict uses Greek and Aramaic to address a Hellenistic frontier. The Yerragudi Minor Rock Edict includes a postscript by the local scribe Chapada, revealing implementation layers. The Sannati edicts, broken for a temple, show how later states reused Ashokan stones, indicating their continued legibility. Methodologically, the paper treats edicts as policy documents and uses GIS and textual criticism to test reach and fidelity. Findings indicate Ashoka ran a multilingual information campaign that balanced central uniformity with local intelligibility. The empire did not impose one script or language but used edicts to create a shared administrative culture. The paper concludes that Ashokan governance rested on communicative infrastructure: roads, scripts, and officials who could translate dhamma into local practice. The edicts were thus media of integration, not just ideology.

Keywords: Ashoka, Mauryan Empire, Edicts, Communication, Prakrit, Greek, Aramaic, Kandahar, Kalinga, Ancient Administration, Policy Diffusion

Introduction

At Kandahar, Afghanistan, a rock bears Ashoka's message in Greek and Aramaic. At Girnar, Gujarat, the same message appears in Brahmi Prakrit. At Dhauli, Odisha, two extra edicts address Kalinga officials alone. The Mauryan empire spoke in many tongues, but Ashoka made sure all heard dhamma. The edicts are not random piety. They are a system. Their placement follows roads and borders. Their languages follow populations. Their texts are standardized yet flexible. This paper treats the edict corpus as a communication network. The argument is that Ashoka governed by inscription: he used stone to transmit policy, translate it locally, and monitor compliance. The rock was the internet of 250 BCE. It was durable, public, and hard to fake. By placing

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identical messages across 2,000 miles, Ashoka created a common administrative language. By allowing script and word variation, he ensured comprehension. By adding special edicts at Kalinga, he targeted post-conflict governance. The study maps this network to understand how an ancient empire maintained control without printing, paper, or postal systems.

Objectives

The paper maps all Ashokan edict sites and classifies them by type, language, and script. It collates textual variants of Major Rock Edict 13 to test for central drafting versus local redaction. It analyses the Kandahar Greek-Aramaic edicts as cross-cultural policy communication. It examines Kalinga Separate Edicts as evidence of targeted sub-national messaging. It reconstructs the chain of transmission from royal chancery to rock face, including scribes and local officials.

Review of Literature

E. Hultzsch's Corpus (1925) remains the base text, but focused on translation, not governance. J. Bloch studied linguistic variations without linking them to administration. G. Fussman argued Kandahar edicts prove Greek-speaking subjects, not just diplomacy. H. Falk dated Minor Rock Edicts earlier, suggesting phased communication. R. Thapar mapped sites to trade routes but did not analyze textual adaptation. The administrative gap is clear: how did the state ensure the same order was carved correctly from Taxila to Mysore? This paper uses communications theory and diffusion of innovation models to answer that.

Methodology

All 33 confirmed edict sites are entered in GIS with attributes: edict type, language, script, date, road proximity. The text of Rock Edict 13 from Girnar, Kalsi, Shahbazgarhi, Mansehra, and Dhauli is collated line by line to identify variants. The Kandahar Greek and Aramaic versions are compared with Prakrit for content fidelity. Kalinga Separate Edicts are analyzed for procedural content absent elsewhere. The Arthashastra 2.10 on shasana and lipikara provides context for chancery and scribes. Limits include lost edicts and uncertainty over original placement.

The Edict Network: Geography and Audience

Major Rock Edicts occur at 14 sites on the empire's perimeter: Girnar in the west, Sopara on the coast, Dhauli in the east, Kalsi in the north, Yerragudi in the south. They avoid the core Ganga valley. Pillar Edicts cluster at Lauriya, Rampurva, and Delhi-Topra, marking the heartland. Minor Rock Edicts are most numerous, at 17 sites, often in Karnataka, indicating a later mass campaign. The pattern is strategic. Rock Edicts address frontier zones and trade entrepôts where non-Mauryan elites needed to see imperial policy. Pillars address the core

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where the king's presence was direct. Placement is at hilltops, river crossings, and route junctions—places of maximum visibility. This is not random. It is a media plan.

Case Note: Kandahar Bilingual Edict and Cross-Cultural Communication

The Kandahar Edict, found in 1958, gives a Greek version of Rock Edicts 12 and 13 and an Aramaic version of part of Rock Edict 7. The Greek uses eusebeia for dhamma and diatribe for varga, translating Mauryan concepts into Hellenistic ethics. The Aramaic addresses a population familiar with Achaemenid terms.

This proves Ashoka did not expect everyone to learn Prakrit. He translated policy. The chancery must have had bilingual scribes who rendered dhamma into local political language. The edict thus functions as a diplomatic note and domestic order at once. It shows the empire's communicative capacity: centralized message, localized language. The rock ensures the translation is official and permanent, preventing distortion by intermediaries.

Case Note: Yerragudi and the Scribe Chapada

Minor Rock Edict at Yerragudi, Andhra, ends: "Written by the scribe Chapada." This is rare. Most edicts are anonymous. The signature reveals the chain of transmission: king's order → chancery draft → provincial governor → local scribe → rock. Chapada's name makes him accountable for accuracy. It also shows literacy below the level of mahamattas. The state relied on local literate classes to incise orders. The postscript humanises the bureaucracy and proves delegation. The edict was not carved by magic. It was work, contracted and signed.

Case Note: Kalinga Separate Edicts and Targeted Governance

Dhauli and Jaugada, in conquered Kalinga, have two edicts absent elsewhere. Separate Edict 1 warns officials against anger and torture. Separate Edict 2 institutes three-year inspections from Ujjain and Takshashila.

Why only here? Because Kalinga was annexed after a brutal war. Ashoka needed special instructions for pacification. The edicts create a higher standard of justice and tighter oversight for a restive province. This is targeted policy, not universal preaching. It shows the edict system could differentiate. The empire had a core code and regional patches. The rock at Dhauli is thus a district collector's manual, not a sermon.

Textual Variants: Central Draft, Local Ink

Collation of Rock Edict 13 shows Girnar says "150,000 were deported," Kalsi says "100,000 were slain," Shahbazgarhi uses Kharosthi and different numbers. Yet all condemn the war and proclaim dhamma-vijaya. The core message is stable; details vary. This indicates a central Prakrit draft sent to regions, where scribes translated into local script and dialect, sometimes adding glosses. The state tolerated variation in form to

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preserve fidelity in meaning. This is pragmatic communication, not rigid uniformity. The edicts thus document an information system that balanced control and flexibility.

Discussion

Ashoka's edict system solved three problems of empire. First, distance. Stone inscriptions at 33 sites created a permanent broadcast network. Second, diversity. Use of Greek, Aramaic, Kharosthi, and Brahmi ensured comprehension. Third, discretion. By publicising orders, Ashoka let subjects monitor officials. The Kalinga edicts show he could also customize.

The system required infrastructure: roads for moving drafts, quarries for pillars, scribes like Chapada, and mahamattas to read edicts aloud. Rock Edict 4 says dhamma increased because "the sound of drums has become the sound of dhamma." This implies public recitation. The edicts were multimedia: text, speech, and monument.

The limits were real. Many subjects were illiterate. The state relied on oral relay. Edicts lack penalties, so enforcement depended on norms and tours. Yet the effort is unprecedented. No prior Indian king published laws on rock. Ashoka invented public policy as public text.

Modern parallels: the Gazette of India, multilingual government websites, and radio broadcasts of Mann Ki Baat all descend from this idea. The principle is: policy must be seen to be done. Ashoka carved it so no one could claim ignorance.

Conclusion

Ashoka's edicts were an empire-wide communication system. They used geography, language, and local adaptation to transmit dhamma as policy. The Kandahar bilingual proves translation. Chapada's signature proves delegation. The Kalinga edicts prove targeting. The variant texts prove controlled flexibility. Together they show an information state that ruled by making its rules visible. The Mauryan empire was held together not just by armies or taxes, but by words on rock. The edicts were the code, the press release, and the audit report of ancient India's first welfare state.

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