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# DHAMMA BY EDICT: ASHOKA'S ROCK INSCRIPTIONS AS INSTRUMENTS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, C. 268–232 BCE

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## Abstract

Ashoka Maurya's rock and pillar edicts are conventionally read as moral exhortations. This paper reinterprets them as instruments of public administration that codified policy, delegated authority, and created monitoring systems across a subcontinental empire. Using 14 Major Rock Edicts, 7 Pillar Edicts, and 3 Minor Rock Edicts, the study identifies four governance mechanisms: (1) policy codification through stone, (2) creation of a new cadre of dhamma-mahamattas for welfare and inspection, (3) use of tours and public readings to disseminate orders, and (4) grievance redressal via fixed time for reporting. The Kalinga Separate Edicts reveal procedural innovations: officials must act impartially, avoid anger, and hear petitions regularly. The Girnar, Dhauli, and Jaugada versions show local adaptation of a centrally drafted text, indicating a hub-and-spoke communication model. Three case notes anchor the analysis. Rock Edict 3 institutes quinquennial tours by officials for inspection and dhamma instruction. Rock Edict 6 establishes that reports may be submitted to the king at any hour, creating an early right to information. Pillar Edict 7 provides a performance audit listing welfare works: wells, rest houses, and animal hospitals. Methodologically, the paper treats edicts as administrative orders and maps clauses to functions: rule-making, delegation, oversight, and feedback. Findings show Ashoka built an information state that used permanent public texts to reduce agency problems across distance. The edicts were not sermons but service charters, inspection manuals, and job descriptions for officials. The paper concludes that Ashokan governance prefigures modern administrative law through public notice, specialized bureaucracy, and citizen access to the sovereign.

**Keywords:** Ashoka, Edicts, Mauryan Administration, Dhamma-Mahamattas, Public Policy, Ancient India, Welfare State, Inscriptions, Governance, Kalinga Edicts

## Introduction

In 260 BCE, after the Kalinga war, Ashoka inscribed his remorse on rock. But he did not stop at remorse. Over the next three decades, he issued orders on rocks and pillars from Kandahar to Karnataka. These texts prohibited animal slaughter on certain days, appointed welfare officers, mandated judicial fairness, and listed hospitals, wells, and roads built by the state. Historians treat them as expressions of dhamma. Administrators should read them as government orders. The edicts name officials, assign duties, fix reporting cycles, and promise access to the king. They were displayed at frontier posts, trade routes, and pilgrim centers where people gathered. This was policy communication by monument. This paper argues that Ashoka created an "edict state" that used inscribed law to govern a diverse empire. The rock was the gazette. The pillar was the circular. The dhamma-mahamatta

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was the ombudsman. By making rules public and permanent, Ashoka reduced the monitoring cost of empire. The study recovers that administrative logic and its relevance to transparency, delegation, and welfare delivery today.

**Objectives**

The paper catalogues governance clauses in Ashoka's Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, and Pillar Edicts. It reconstructs the duties, jurisdiction, and reporting lines of dhamma-mahamattas and other officials. It analyses the Kalinga Separate Edicts as procedural manuals for district administration. It maps geographic variations in edict texts to assess central drafting and local adaptation. It extracts principles of transparency, accessibility, and welfare accountability for comparative public administration.

**Review of Literature**

Romila Thapar read the edicts as ideology, arguing dhamma was a non-sectarian civic ethic to unify the empire. D.R. Bhandarkar emphasized their Buddhist content. R.K. Mookerji compiled the texts but treated them as moral teachings. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri noted their administrative detail but did not theorize it. Upinder Singh examined their communication strategy yet focused on persuasion, not procedure. The gap is administrative. Few scholars ask: who implemented these orders, how were they monitored, and what penalties existed for non-compliance? This paper uses public administration concepts of principal–agent, street-level bureaucracy, and policy diffusion to fill that gap.

**Methodology**

Primary data are Hultzsch (1925) and Sircar (1965) editions of all Ashokan edicts. Each clause is coded for: (1) policy domain: welfare, justice, ethics, (2) administrative action: appoint, prohibit, build, inspect, (3) official named, (4) frequency clause, (5) audience. The Kalinga Separate Edicts at Dhauli and Jaugada are treated as district-level standing orders. Geographic comparison of Girnar, Kalsi, Shahbazgarhi, and Mansehra texts tests for local adaptation. The Arthashastra provides context for pre-existing bureaucracy. Limits include loss of perishable orders and absence of penalties in edicts themselves.

**The Edict as Administrative Order**

Ashoka's edicts have a consistent structure: royal authority, problem statement, order, official responsible, and dissemination instruction. Rock Edict 1 prohibits animal sacrifice and festive gatherings, then states "this has been written so that officials may act accordingly." This is a directive. Rock Edict 5 creates dhamma-mahamattas "for the welfare and happiness of dhamma-yutas," specifying jurisdiction over all sects, prisoners, and the aged. Pillar Edict 1 repeats the creation and adds "they are occupied with the affairs of all sects." These are job descriptions, not sermons. The texts function as general administrative rules, binding on officials across the empire.

Case Note: Rock Edict 3 and Quinquennial Tours

Rock Edict 3, issued in the 12th year, orders yuktas, rajukas, and pradeshikas to go on tour every five years for inspection and dhamma instruction, besides their regular work. They must also teach: "obedience to mother and

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father, liberality to friends, acquaintances, relatives, Brahmanas and Sramanas, abstention from killing, and moderation in expenditure."

This is an inspection manual. It sets a five-year cycle, names three levels of officials, and defines the content of inspection: both revenue work and moral instruction. The tour is mandatory, creating routine state presence. By inscribing it, Ashoka makes the tour a public entitlement. Subjects can expect officials to visit and can complain if they do not. The edict thus converts an internal order into a citizen charter.

Case Note: Rock Edict 6 and Access to the King

Rock Edict 6 states: "I consider it my duty to promote the welfare of all. The basis of this is effort and dispatch of business. No task is more important than the welfare of all people. Whatever exertion I make, it is to discharge my debt to beings. I make them happy here and hereafter. For this purpose I have ordered that reports be made to me at any hour and in any place, whether I am eating, in the harem, in the inner apartment, in the lavatory, in the palanquin, or in the park."

This is a radical access rule. It suspends protocol to ensure information flow. No official can block a petitioner by citing the king's routine. The edict creates a right to be heard and fixes accountability on the sovereign. It addresses the principal–agent problem: how does a king know what distant officials do? Answer: by guaranteeing direct reporting. The stone publicises this right, so officials cannot claim ignorance.

Case Note: Pillar Edict 7 and the Performance Audit

Pillar Edict 7, Ashoka's last major edict, is a summary report. It lists: appointment of dhamma-mahamattas, planting of banyan trees and mango groves, digging of wells every half-kos, building of rest-houses, establishment of animal and human hospitals, and import of medicinal herbs. It ends: "This is my order. This is to be engraved so that it may last long and my sons and grandsons may follow it."

This is an annual report carved in stone. It quantifies outputs: wells at fixed intervals, species of trees, categories of hospitals. It sets a standard for successors. The edict functions as a performance dashboard and succession policy. Citizens and future officials can measure compliance against this list. The inscription ensures intergenerational accountability.

The Kalinga Separate Edicts: District Administration Manual

At Dhauli and Jaugada, Ashoka issued two special edicts not found elsewhere. Separate Edict 1 tells mahamattas of Tosali: "You are in charge of many thousands of living beings. You must gain their affection. All men are my children. Just as I desire my children to enjoy all happiness in this world and the next, so I desire for all men. You do not understand how far my intention goes. Some single person understands it, but even he only partially. You must attend to this matter. It happens in administration that a person suffers imprisonment or torture. You must avoid anger, harshness, and hurry. You must practice impartiality. You must not be jealous."

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Separate Edict 2 creates a three-year review: "Every three years, a mahamatta shall set out from Ujjain, Takshashila, and Tosali for inspection. They shall carry out their instructions and also other business."

These are standing orders for frontier districts. They set ethical standards for criminal justice, mandate humane treatment, and establish a three-year inspection by central officers. This is delegated administration with audit. The edicts address abuse of power directly, showing Ashoka diagnosed the risks of distance and discretion.

**Discussion**

Ashoka's edicts reveal a coherent administrative system. First, policy was codified on stone, making it public, durable, and uniform. Second, a specialized cadre, dhamma-mahamattas, was created for welfare, inter-sect harmony, and prison inspection, separate from revenue officials. Third, routine tours and fixed reporting times institutionalised monitoring and feedback. Fourth, welfare was defined as state responsibility: wells, trees, hospitals, roads.

Three principles emerge. One, transparency reduces discretion. By publishing duties, Ashoka enabled subjects to demand performance. Two, access reduces information asymmetry. Rock Edict 6 lets any person bypass officials. Three, audit sustains policy. Pillar Edict 7 measures outputs and binds successors.

The limits are clear. Edicts lack penalties for officials and do not mention taxes, armies, or succession. They are not a complete constitution. Yet they show that moral governance required administrative machinery. Dhamma was implemented by mahamattas, not monks.

Modern parallels are strong. The Right to Information Act mirrors Rock Edict 6. Social audits of MGNREGA echo Pillar Edict 7. Citizen charters repeat Rock Edict 3's public duties. Ashoka's innovation was to use monuments as media for administrative law.

**Conclusion**

Ashoka's rock edicts were not sermons. They were government orders that created officers, set routines, guaranteed access, and reported performance. They used stone to solve problems of distance, discretion, and succession. The edict state made policy public so that officials could be held to it and citizens could claim it. Dhamma was thus not just an ethic. It was a program of administration, inscribed, delegated, and audited. The rocks still speak because they were meant to govern, not just preach.

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