

Review

Patrick Olivelle, Janice Leoshko and Himanshu Prabha Ra (eds), *Reimagining Asoka: Memory and History*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012. xiv + 450pp. INR2065.00. ISBN 0-19-807800-5 (hardback).

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Considering the plethora of published literature on Asoka, produced by hundreds of Indian and foreign scholars over the last two centuries, another book on Asoka may be regarded one too many. But that cannot be said of this collection of 19 erudite papers by 6 Indian and 13 international scholars, which bears the unlikely title 'Reimagining Asoka'. They were presented and discussed at an international conference held in New Delhi in August 2009 as a joint project of the University of Texas, Austin and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi on the theme: 'Asoka and the Making of Modern India'.

The editors explain the choice of the title thus: 'While Asoka is reimagined in modern India in a variety of political and religious contexts, he was reimagined in earlier centuries in India as well as other parts of Asia such as China, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia'. The only example they give for this phenomenon is the Pali account of the second coronation of Devanampiya Tissa of Sri Lanka according to Mauryan rites in the Sri Lankan chronicles. This is said to be 'marking the integration of the concepts of the universal monarch (*cak-kavatti*) and the great man (*mahapurusa*)'. This is certainly a figment of ingenious imagination on the part of the editors because the chronicles record the incident as history. According to the Sri Lankan historical tradition, Asoka's relations with Sri Lanka had been clearly political as seen from the investment of his own honorific Devanampiya on Sri Lankan king Tissa, which many of his successors applied to themselves, and the sending of eight of the maternal uncles of Mahinda and Sanghmitta to form a hereditary administrative clan of Lambakannas, who within three centuries rose to royalty. Nor can the other data in the Sri Lankan commentaries and chronicles, preserved also in the Chinese *Shan-jian-lu-piposha* (minus, of course, the religious underpinnings such as accounts of miracles and previous births), be dismissed as imaginary. These have been supported by significant archaeological and epigraphic evidence from Sarnath, Allahabad, Sanchi and Sonari in India and Anuradhapura and Rajagala in Sri Lanka.

It is, however, true that Asoka slipped from Indian memory even as the *Avadana* literature in Sanskrit came into existence. The four discrete *Avadanas* in the *Divyavadana*, which are taken to constitute the hitherto undiscovered *Asokavadana* or *Asokasutra*, and the Chinese *Ayuwangching* and *Ayuwanchuang* may be examples of how Asoka came to be imagined in India and China. Chronologically, two Asokas came to be combined into one and the Mauryan Asoka is regarded as a contemporary of Sanakavasa and his disciple Upagupta, who lived at least a century before him. Here Asoka had to be portrayed as a very ugly and cruel person killing 500 of his own women of the harem and establishing a torture house. His professional torturer would not spare even a Buddhist monk. The miraculous survival of the monk, boiled in a cauldron of oil, brings about the emperor's conversion to Buddhism. Even then he is intolerant enough to institute a pogrom against Jain monks by offering a dinar for every head brought to him because one of them had desecrated a Buddha statue! Reduced to utter poverty in old age by his grandchildren, the mighty monarch takes revenge by presenting the empire to the Sangha thus compelling his successors to redeem it at a great cost. Based on such an account, even modern scholars, copying from earlier works without verification, dub Asoka to be an illegitimate son and a monster of piety. All this obviously is in the domain of fertile imagination.

In the light of prevailing misconceptions of Asoka and his place in history, this publication has to be welcomed as a timely effort of a team of reputed scholars to unravel history with due evaluation of all available sources. Jawaharlal Nehru's historic decision to associate Asoka with modern India by adopting his *cakra* in the national flag and the capital of his Sarnath pillar as the state emblem has inspired the theme.

In the Prolegomena is a mature re-evaluation of Asoka by Romila Thapar with the inspiring message that 'We today can claim to be inheritors of his ideas only when our ideas and actions draw strength, not from rules and legislation, but preferably from persuasion. We have a long way to go' (p. 36). Following it is a well-documented introduction to Asokan inscriptions by K. R. Norman.

Equally informative is Himanshu Prabha Ray's discussion of the geographical aspect of the Mauryan empire, with which Part I entitled 'Emergence of Asokan Studies' begins. Shailendra Bhandare's painstaking attempt to identify Mauryan or Asokan coins concludes realistically as 'at best an exercise in approximation or at worst a flight of fancy' (p. 128). Little has been known until now of Bhagwan Indraj, who according to Virchand Dharamsey, had been the first pioneering Indian archaeologist and epigraphist to work on Asoka.

The nine studies of 'Asoka and his Times' in Part II are by one Indian and eight foreign scholars. Patrick Olivelle discusses, among others, the ritualistic public recitations of the edicts of Asoka, as enjoined by the emperor, and relates the grouping of words and spaces between them in certain edicts as facilitating the reader (p. 162). Olivelle's view that Asoka would have had the

assistance of professional writers in drafting his inscriptions is contrary to the assessment of T. W. Rhys Davis that the tone of some edicts would preempt anybody other than the emperor from expressing them. Oskar Von Hinuber's observation that the linguistic variations in Asokan inscriptions were a deliberate attempt to cater to the differentiation of languages in Buddhist schools needs evidential support (p. 201). A question to be asked is why Asoka had no inscriptions in Sanskrit for the Mahasanghika school evolving into Mahayana. Harry Falk raises a question whether *atabhagiya* in the Lumbini inscription, which had hitherto been applied to taxation, could be a reference to a share of the Buddha's ashes. Richard Salomon's issue is whether the Vikrama and Azes Eras are identical and his answer is 'Only time will tell—perhaps' (p. 227). Similarly Vidula Jayaswal wonders how the inscription at Chunar was written in kharosti script in a Brahmi script area and concludes that the carver was a foreigner.

One wonders how Jean-Francois Salles' paper on environmental changes in North Bengal came to be presented for a conference on Asoka as all that it says is that Pundranagar was founded before Asoka ascended the throne (p. 262). Mark McClish asserts that absolutely no evidence exists to connect the *Arthashastra* to Canakya or the Mauryans, as currently postulated. Grant Parker, who commences with the assumption that Asoka could have had a Greek mother, devotes his paper to an examination of why and for whom the Greek and Aramaic inscriptions of Kandahar were written.

These nine papers leave more questions unanswered than answered. But to a student of Asokan history, they give a satisfactory feeling that the great emperor continues to be a subject of research and a band of scholars from all over examines all aspects of his life, career and times.

The concluding Part III is enigmatically called 'Asoka Re-imagined'. In it, Janice Leoshko deals with Asoka and Museums. Starting with the hardly noticed and yet to be publicized metal replica of the Girnar inscriptions in front of the National Museum of New Delhi, she provides evidence to illustrate how 'the material imprint' of Asoka's reign goes unnoticed in the world museums. Referring to the controversy over Surendran Nair's painting of nude Icarus on a four-lion capital, she asks the question whether the artist who incorporated the four-lion motif in the southern archway of the Sanchi stupa knew that it was the capital of the Asokan Pillar at Sarnath and opines 'Visitors must perform another imaginative act to re-imagine possible effect' (p. 347). John S. Strong's explanation of the reference in Minor Rock Edict I to commingling of gods and humans has nothing to say about the making of modern India. So is Max Meeg's paper on Asoka—Model Ruler without a Name. He, too, like Strong takes his data from the imaginary *Asokavadana* (unless the four disconnected chapters of the *Divyavadana* are so designated) and states that Sanakavasa and Upagupta are Asoka's *gurus*, disregarding that at least Sanakavasa, who was a contemporary of Kalasoka (Asoka the Black = Kakavarnin of the Puranas) and predating Mauryan Asoka by more than a century.

Cheong Li refers to Asoka-type Buddha images 'reputedly made by king Asoka or his daughter', without examining whether any Buddha images existed even in India at the time of Asoka. He apparently imagines that these images travelled all the way to China in extraordinary circumstances alighting in particular along the coast areas (pp. 380, 390). The impression given is that Cheong Li takes as history the old legend which includes China within Asoka's empire and says that one-nineteenth of 80,000 stupas built by Asoka were in China, as referred to by Joseph Edkins in his *Chinese Buddhism—a Volume of Sketches Historical, Critical and Descriptive* (London: 1893, p. 105).

A refreshing effort to stick to the theme of the conference is seen in the last paper by Bhagwan Josh on 'Asoka, the Historical Discourse and the Post-Colonial State'. His detailed account brings out the fact that the credit for reviving the memory of Asoka in India goes to Jawaharlal Nehru. But whether Nehru's idealism continues to influence India in its internal affairs and external relations remains an undiscussed issue. This paper and, in reality, this book concludes with the puzzling statement: 'Today the emblem of Asoka is embossed or imprinted on rockets, missiles and other weapons of destruction produced by Indian state. History has come full circle' (p. 407). Does it resonate D. R. Bhandarkar's lament in 1923: 'Asoka's new angle of vision, however, sounded the death-knell to the Indian aspiration of a centralized national state and world-wide empire?'

This is a collection of thematically unrelated articles reflecting the wide-ranging interests of an international team of scholars. It is, however, difficult to believe that the majority of these papers were specifically prepared for serious discussion at a conference convened particularly to explore the subject of 'Asoka and the Making of Modern India'. The editors must have experienced this difficulty and that may explain the title of the book '*Re-imagining Asoka: Memory and History*'. But imagination supersedes history.

Yet on the positive side, it must be said that each article is a well-researched and lucidly presented academic exercise exposing current conclusions to be revisited and revised and raising new questions and issues to be studied. But as Grant Parker states with regard to his paper, several writers must have felt that 'the material at hand demands the massaging of limited, uneven evidence' (p. 310). There is no doubt that Asoka continues to be studied from diverse angles in the seats of higher learning of the world.

Two things are most useful: (1) the large number of photos, maps and illustrations (though one wishes that some at least were larger and clearer) and (2) the impressive, though not exhaustive, list of references running into 39 pages (pp. 409–48). *Reimagining Asoka: Memory and History* is a book that should be in the hands of every student of Asoka because the rich content, as well as the issues raised, could be both challenging and indicative of the need for further research. With my life-long interest in Asoka, I read this volume with the greatest of interest and recommend it to all students of Indian history, Buddhism and Peace Studies.