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# UNIT 21 ASOKA'S POLICY OF DHAMMA

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## 21.0 OBJECTIVES

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This Unit deals with Asoka's Policy of **Dhamma**. After reading this Unit you will be able to understand:

- the historical background of the formulation of the policy of **Dhamma**,
- the way **Dhamma** figures prominently in Asokan Edicts,
- the essence of Asoka's policy of **Dhamma** as explained by him and as manifested in his welfare activities, paternal attitude, etc.,
- the distinction between Asoka as an individual—a believer in Buddhism and Asoka as an emperor initiating a state policy, and
- the various means employed by Asoka to propagate his policy of **Dhamma**—the role of the **Dhamma mahamatras**.

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## 21.1 INTRODUCTION

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Asoka Maurya, succeeded to the Mauryan throne around 269 B.C. Many historians consider him as one of the greatest kings of the ancient world. His policy of **Dhamma** has been a topic of lively discussion among scholars. The word **Dhamma** is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word **Dharma**. **Dhamma** has been variously translated as piety, moral life, righteousness and so on, but the best way to understand what Asoka means by **Dhamma** is to read his edicts. The edicts were written primarily to explain to the people throughout the empire the principles of **Dhamma**. This is why most of the edicts have something or the other to say about **Dhamma**, about how keen Asoka was that his subjects should practise **Dhamma** and how keen he was that the affairs of the state too were carried out according to the principles of **Dhamma**. To make principles of **Dhamma** accessible and understandable to all, he put up edicts or inscriptions at the important points throughout the empire and sent messengers of **Dhamma** outside the empire.

It must be clearly understood that **Dhamma** was not any particular religious faith or practice; so we should not translate **Dhamma** (or its Sanskrit equivalent **Dharma**) as religion. It was also not an arbitrarily formulated royal policy. **Dhamma** related to norms of social behaviour and activities in a very general sense and in his **Dhamma** Asoka attempted a very careful synthesis of various norms which were current in his time. To understand why and how Asoka formulated **Dhamma** and what he meant by it, one has therefore to understand the characteristics of the time in which he lived and to refer to Buddhist, Brahmanical and various other texts where norms of social behaviour are explained.

## 21.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the various aspects of the policy of **Dhamma** and the reasons for its formulation we would necessarily need to sketch the historical background against which it became possible for Asoka to enunciate it. In the next three sub-sections we shall deal with this historical background.

### 21.2.1 Socio-economic Background

The Mauryan period witnessed a change in the economic structure of the society. With the use of iron, resulting in surplus production, a changeover took place from a simple rural economy to a pattern of economy in which cities and towns also played an important part. It has been generally argued that the use of the Northern Black Polished Ware Pottery is an indicator of material prosperity of the period. The use of Punch-marked silver coins and some other varieties of coins, the conscious intervention of the State to safeguard trade routes and the rise of urban centres point to a structural change in the economy requiring necessary adjustments in the society. The commercial classes had also come to the forefront. The emergence of urban culture by its very logic demanded a more flexible social organisation. The incorporation of tribes and peoples from the outlying areas into the social fabric also presented a problem.

The response of the Brahmanical social order based on the four-fold **varna** division was to make the caste system more rigid and deny a higher status to the commercial class. The rigidity of the Brahmanical class sharpened the division within the society. The lower orders turned to the various heterodox sects and this created social tensions. It was this situation which emperor Asoka inherited when he ascended the Mauryan throne.

### 21.2.2 Religious Conditions

The Brahmanical hold over society, assiduously built through the later Vedic period, was coming under increasing attack. The privileges of the priests, the rigidity of the caste system and the elaborate rituals were being questioned. The lower orders among the four castes began to favour the new sects. The Vaisyas who were technically included in the higher category were treated as inferior to both Brahmanas and Kshatriyas. The opposition of the commercial class to Brahmanism was to give a filip to the other sects of the society.

Buddhism began as a schismatic movement from the more orthodox outlook of Brahmanism. Its basic tenet was an emphasis on misery and advocacy of the "middle path". It was a set of ethical principles. Buddhism opposed the dominance of the Brahmanas and the concept of sacrifices and rituals. It thus appealed to the lower orders and to the emerging social classes. The human approach to relations in society preached by Buddhism further attracted different sections to Buddhism.

### 21.2.3 Polity

You have already read that the **Mahajanapadas** of the sixth century B.C., marked the beginning of the state system in many parts of India. This means that only a small section of society came to have monopoly of power which they exercised over the rest of the society in various ways and for various purposes. There were monarchies in which the King was the supreme authority and there were **gana-samghas** in which the rulers were a group of hereditary **Kshatriyas** or member of a clan. By the time, Asoka ascended the throne, the state system, over a period of more than two hundred years, had grown very elaborate and complex. It was characterized by:

- The political supremacy of one region (Magadha) over a vast territory which comprised many previous kingdoms, **gana-samghas** and areas where no organised states had existed before.
- Existence, within this vast territory, of various geographical regions, cultural areas, and of different faiths, beliefs and practices.
- Monopoly of force by a ruling class of which the emperor was the supreme head.
- Appropriation of a very substantial quantity of surplus from agriculture, commerce and other sources.

- Existence of an administrative apparatus.

The complexity of the state system demanded an imaginative policy from the emperor which required minimal use of force in such a large empire having diverse forms of economy and religions. It could not have been controlled by an army alone. A more feasible alternative was the propagation of a policy that would work at an ideological level and reach out to all sections of the society. The policy of **Dhamma** was such an endeavour.

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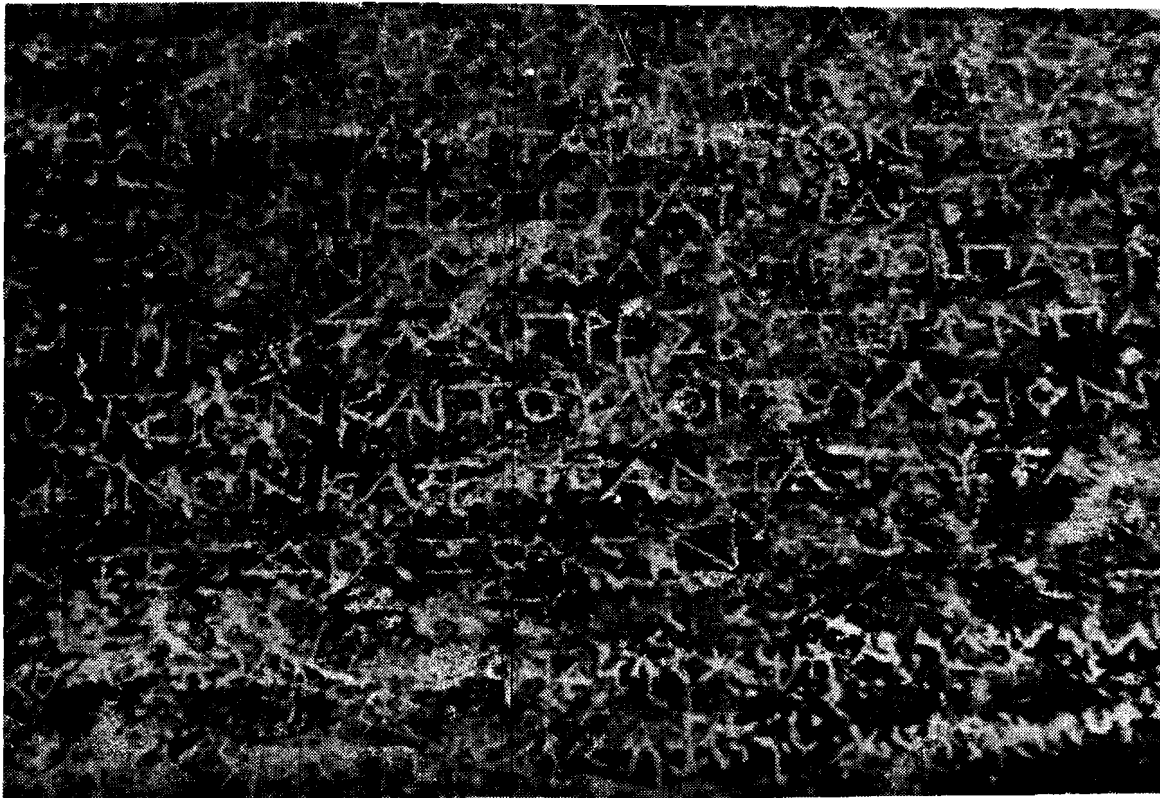
### 21.3 DISTRIBUTION OF INSCRIPTIONS

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Asoka used the medium of his Edicts to expound the policy of **Dhamma**. Study the map given in Unit 18 of this block. It shows to you the distribution of Asoka's inscriptions of various kinds such as:

- Major Rock Edicts
- Minor Rock Edicts
- Pillar Edicts and so on.

Asoka engraved his views about **Dhamma** on these edicts which were meant to be read by people of various areas. In doing so, Asoka was trying to establish direct communication with his subjects. These inscriptions were written in different years of his rule. An examination of the principles as expressed in them would give us a clear idea of what Asoka meant by **Dhamma**.



8. An Asokan Inscription (Kandhar)

The inscriptions can be divided into two categories. The smaller group of these inscriptions reveal that the king was a follower of Buddhism and were addressed to the Buddhist Church or the **Samgha**. In these there is declaration of Asoka's own relationship with the Buddhist order. In one of the inscriptions he mentions by their title some of the scriptures with which all Buddhists should be familiar with.

Inscriptions of the other category are known as the Major and Minor Rock Edicts which were inscribed on rock surfaces. It included also the Pillar Edicts inscribed on specially erected pillars.

All sites of Asokan inscriptions were chosen carefully to ensure that they were accessible to a large number of people. Thus, as has been pointed out, these edicts

may be described as proclamations to the public at large. They explain the idea of **Dhamma**. We must make a distinction between Asoka's policy of **Dhamma** which stressed on social responsibility and Asoka's own commitment as a Buddhist. There has been a tendency in the past amongst historians to study the policy of **Dhamma** and Asoka as a Buddhist in the same context, without making any distinction. A careful examination of the inscriptions would suggest that Asoka on the one hand declared his personal association with the Buddhist order and on the other he tried to teach, through the policy of **Dhamma**, the importance of social responsibility and toleration amongst different members of the society. We will discuss this in detail in the subsequent sections.

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## 21.4 DHAMMA – CAUSES

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In examining the causes for the policy of **Dhamma**, we have already outlined the historical background, earlier in this Unit. We have suggested that the policy of **Dhamma** was an earnest attempt at solving some of the problems that a complex society faced. However, the policy was nurtured in the mind of Asoka and through it he attempted to resolve some of the tensions within the society. Asoka's private beliefs and his own perceptions of how he should respond to the problems of his empire were responsible for the formulation of the policy of **Dhamma**. It is necessary for us to understand the immediate social environment in which Asoka grew up as it influenced him in the later years of his life.

The Mauryan kings are known to have adopted an eclectic outlook. Chandragupta took recourse to Jainism in his later years and Bindusara favoured the Ajivikas. Asoka himself adopted Buddhism in his personal life, though he never imposed Buddhism on his subjects. Before studying the actual contents of **Dhamma** let us briefly recapitulate the main points of the overall situation that shaped a policy such as this:

- By the time Asoka ascended the throne the Mauryan imperial system had become a complex phenomenon. The imperial system encompassed various cultures, beliefs and social and political patterns. Asoka had to either maintain the structure by force, which would incur tremendous expenses, or to define a set of social norms which would be acceptable to all, cutting across all social practices and religious beliefs. Asoka found his answer in the policy of **Dhamma**.
- Asoka was aware of the tensions which the rise of heterodox sects like Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikism had generated in society. They were all opposed to the domination of the Brahmanas in some way or the other and had a growing number of supporters. But Brahmanas continued to have strong hold on society and some measure of hostility was inevitable. It was essential to bring about a climate of harmony and mutual trust in a situation such as this.
- There were obviously many areas within the empire where neither Brahmanical system nor following of the heterodox sects prevailed. Asoka himself refers to the country of the Yavanas where neither Brahmanical nor Sramanical culture was in vogue. Besides, there were many tribal areas in the empire where people were obviously not familiar either with Brahmanical or heterodox ideas. To make the empire survive and to bring some measure of cohesion within the empire in the midst of such diversity it was essential that there should be some common pattern of behaviour and common approach to the problems of society.

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss briefly the historical background against which the policy of **Dhamma** formulated. Your answer should not exceed 15 lines.

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- 2) Mark right (✓) or wrong (×) against the following statements.
- i) Asoka used the medium of Edicts to expound his policy of **Dhamma**. ( )
- ii) Asoka aimed at promoting Buddhism through the policy of **Dhamma**. ( )
- iii) The Pillar Edicts were inscribed on specially erected pillars. ( )
- 3) What were the social tensions that the policy of **Dhamma** aimed at resolving? Explain in five lines.

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## 21.5 CONTENTS OF DHAMMA

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The principles of **Dhamma** were so formulated as to be acceptable to people belonging to different communities and following any religious sect. **Dhamma** was not given any formal definition or structure. It emphasised on toleration and general behaviour. **Dhamma** stressed on dual toleration—it emphasised on toleration of people themselves and also on toleration of their various beliefs and ideas. There is a stress on the notion of showing consideration towards slaves and servants; there is stress also on obedience to elders; generosity towards the needy, Brahmanas and Sramanas, etc. Asoka also pleaded for tolerance of different religious sects in an attempt to create a sense of harmony.

The policy of **Dhamma** also laid stress on non-violence. Non-violence was to be practised by giving up war and conquests and also as a restraint on the killing of animals. However, Asoka realized that a certain display of his political might may be necessary to keep the primitive forest tribes in check.

The policy of **Dhamma** also included certain welfare measures, like planting of trees, digging of wells, etc. Asoka attacked ceremonies and sacrifices practised regularly on various occasions as meaningless. A group of officers known as the **Dhamma mahamattas** were instituted to implement and publicise the various aspects of **Dhamma**. Asoka thrust a very heavy responsibility on them to carry his message to the various sections of the society. However, they seem gradually to have developed into a type of priesthood of **Dhamma** with great powers and soon began to interfere in politics as well.

In order to make all these aspects of **Dhamma** clearer, we will see how the policy chronologically developed by examining the contents of some of the Edicts.

**Major Rock Edict I** declares prohibition of animal sacrifice and holiday of festive gatherings.

**Major Rock Edict II** relates to certain measures of social welfare which are included in the working of **Dhamma**. It mentions medical treatment for men and animals, construction of roads, wells, tree planting, etc.

**Major Rock Edict III** declares that liberality towards Brahmanas and Sramanas is a virtue, respect to mother and father, etc are all good qualities.

**Major Rock Edict IV** is a very important statement of the policy of **Dhamma**. The edict comments that due to the policy of **Dhamma** the lack of morality and disrespect towards Brahmanas and Sramanas, violence, unseemly behaviour to friends, relatives and others and evils of this kind have been checked. The killing of animals to a large extent was also stopped.

**Major Rock Edict V** refers to the appointment of **Dhamma-mahamattas** for the first time in the twelfth year of his reign. These special officers were appointed by the king to look after the interests of all sects and religions and spread the message of **Dhamma** in each nook and corner of the society. The implementation of the policy of **Dhamma** was entrusted in their hands.

**Major Rock Edict VI** is an instruction to **Dhamma-mahamattas**. They are told that they could bring their reports to the king at any time, irrespective of whatever activity he may be engaged in. The second part of the Edict deals with speedy administration and transaction of smooth business.

**Major Rock Edict VII** is a plea for toleration amongst all the sects. It appears from the edict that tensions among the sects were expressed intensely, perhaps in open antagonism. The plea is part of the overall strategy to maintain unity.

**Major Rock Edict VIII** states that **Dhammayatras** (tours) would be undertaken by the emperor. The earlier practice, of the emperor, of going out on hunting expeditions was given up. **Dhammayatras** enabled the emperor to come into contact with various sections of people in the empire.

**Major Rock Edict IX** attacks ceremonies performed after birth, illness, marriage and before setting out for a journey. A censure is passed against ceremonies observed by wives and mothers. Asoka instead lays stress on the practice of **Dhamma** and uselessness of ceremonies.

**Major Rock Edict X** denounces fame and glory and reasserts the merits of following the policy of **Dhamma**.

**Major Rock Edict XI** is a further explanation of the policy of **Dhamma**. Emphasis is on respect to elders, abstaining from killing animals, and liberality towards friends.

**Major Rock Edict XII** is again an appeal towards toleration among sects. This edict reflects the anxiety the king felt due to the conflict between sects and carries his plea for harmony.

**Major Rock Edict XIII** is of paramount importance in understanding the Asokan policy of **Dhamma**. The Rock Edict pleads for conquest by **Dhamma** instead of War. This is a logical culmination of the thought processes which began from the first Rock Edict, and by conquest what is perhaps meant is the adaptation of the policy of **Dhamma** by a country, rather than its territorial control. The text of the Edict reads:

“When he had been consecrated eight years the Beloved of the Gods, the king Piyadassi, conquered Kalinga. A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished. Afterwards, now that Kalinga was annexed, the Beloved of the Gods very earnestly practised **Dhamma**, desired **Dhamma** and taught **Dhamma**. On conquering Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, for, when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death, and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods, and weighs heavily on his mind. What is even more deplorable to the Beloved of the Gods is that those who dwell there, whether Brahmanas, Sramanas, or those of other sects, or householders who show obedience to their superiors, obedience to mother and father, obedience to their teachers and behave well and devotedly towards their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves and servants—all suffer violence, murder and separation from their loved ones. Even those who are fortunate to have escaped, and whose love is undiminished (by the brutalizing effect of War), suffer from the misfortunes of their friends, acquaintances, colleagues and relatives. This participation of all men in suffering weighs heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods. Except among the Greeks, there is no land where the religious orders of Brahmanas and Sramanas are not to be found, and there

is no land anywhere where men do not support one sect or another. Today, if a hundredth or a thousandth part of those people who were killed or died or were deported when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer similarly, it would weigh heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods.”

“This inscription of **Dhamma** has been engraved so that any sons or great grandsons that I may have should not think of gaining new conquests, and in whatever victories they may gain should be satisfied with patience and light punishment. They should only consider conquest by **Dhamma** to be a true Conquest, and delight in **Dhamma** should be their whole delight, for this is of value in both this world and the next.”

This is Asoka’s testament against war. It graphically depicts the tragedy of war and shows why he turned against it. It is a unique event in the annals of the ancient world because we do not know of any other contemporary monarch who renounced war. Asoka embarked on the policy of **Dhamma** after this war.



9. Rock Edict of Asoka (Gujarra).

## 21.6 ASOKA’S DHAMMA AND THE MAURYAN STATE

Asoka’s **Dhamma** was not simply a collection of high sounding phrases. He very consciously tried to adopt it as a matter of state policy for he declared that “All men are my children” and ‘whatever exertion I make, I strive only to discharge the debt that I owe to all living creatures’. It was a totally new and inspiring ideal of kingship. In the **Arthashastra** the King owed nothing to anyone. His only job was to rule the state efficiently.

Asoka renounced war and conquest by violence and forbade the killing of many animals. Asoka himself set the example of vegetarianism by almost stopping the consumption of meat in the royal household. Since he wanted to conquer the world through love and faith, he sent many missions to propagate **Dhamma**. Such missions were sent to far off places like Egypt, Greece, Sri Lanka, etc. The propagation of **Dhamma** included many measures for people’s welfare. Centres for the medical treatment of men and beasts were founded inside and outside the empire. Shady groves, wells, fruit orchards and rest houses were laid out. This kind of charity work was a radically different attitude from the king of **Arthashastra** who would not incur any expenses unless they brought more revenues in return.

Asoka also prohibited useless sacrifices and certain forms of gatherings which led to waste and indiscipline and superstition. As mentioned earlier, in order to implement these policies he recruited a new cadre of officials called **Dhammamahamattas**. Part of this group’s duties was to see to it that people of various sects were treated fairly. Moreover they were especially asked to look after the welfare of prisoners. Many convicts who were kept in fetters after their sentence had expired, were to be released. Those sentenced to death were to be given a grace for three days. Asoka also started **Dhamma yatras**. He and his high officials were to tour the country in order to propagate **Dhamma** and establish direct contact with his subjects. It was because of such attitudes and policies that modern writers like Kern called him “a monk in a king’s garb.”

## 21.7 DHAMMA – INTERPRETATIONS

The Asokan policy of **Dhamma** has been an issue of intense controversy and debate amongst scholars. Some scholars have suggested that Asoka was a partisan Buddhist and have equated **Dhamma** with Buddhism.

It has also been suggested that it was the original Buddhist thought that was being preached by Asoka as **Dhamma** and later on certain theological additions were made to Buddhism. This kind of thinking is based on some Buddhist chronicles. It is believed that the Kalinga war was a dramatic turning point where Asoka out of remorse for the death and destruction of war, decided to become a Buddhist. The Buddhist records also credit him with the propagation of Buddhism in India and abroad. One cannot, however, lay the charge of being partisan against Asoka. There are two strong arguments to prove that Asoka, as an emperor, did not favour Buddhism at the expense of other religious faiths.

- i) Asoka's creation of the institution of the **Dhammamahamattas** convincingly proves that Asoka's **Dhamma** did not favour any particular religious doctrine. Had that been the case, then there would have been no need for such an office, as Asoka could have utilized the organisation of **Samgha** to propagate **Dhamma**.
- ii) A careful study of the Rock Edicts depicts that Asoka wanted to promote tolerance and respect for all religious sects and the duty of the **Dhammamahamattas** included working for the Brahmanas and the Sramans.

These two points made it clear that the policy of **Dhamma** was not the policy of a heretic but a system of beliefs created out of different religious faiths.

There has been some discussion among historians about the results of Asoka's propagation of **Dhamma**. Some historians believe that Asoka's banning of sacrifices and the favour that he showed to the Buddhists led to a Brahmanical reaction. This in turn led to the decline of the Mauryan empire. Others believe that the stopping of wars and emphasis on non-violence crippled the military might of the empire. This led to the collapse of the empire, after the death of Asoka.

It has been shown by Romila Thapar that Asoka's **Dhamma**, apart from being a superb document of his essential humaneness was also an answer to the socio-political needs of the contemporary situation. That it was not anti-Brahmanical is proved by the fact that respect for the Brahmanas and Sramans is an integral part of his **Dhamma**. His emphasis on non-violence did not blind him to the needs of the state. Thus, addressing the forest tribes he warns them that although he hates to use coercion he may be required to resort to force if they continue to create trouble. By the time Asoka stopped war, the entire Indian sub-continent was under his control. In deep south he was on friendly terms with the Cholas and Pandyas. Sri Lanka was an admiring ally. Thus, Asoka's no to war came at a time when his empire had reached its natural boundaries. The plea for tolerance was a wise course of action in an ethnically diverse, religiously varied and class divided society. Asoka's empire was a conglomerate of diverse groups. There were farmers, pastoral nomads and hunter-gatherers, there were Greeks, Kambojas and Bhojas and hundreds of groups having divergent traditions. In this situation a plea for tolerance was the need of the hour. Asoka tried to transcend the parochial cultural traditions by a broad set of ethical principles.

Asoka's **Dhamma** could not survive him. As such it was a failure. However, we should remember that he was not establishing a new religion. He was simply trying to impress upon the society the need for ethical and moral principles.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Explain in ten lines the main principles of the policy of **Dhamma**.

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2) Take a map of India and mark the following places where Edicts have been located.

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| a) Brahmagiri | d) Kalsi     |
| b) Dhauri     | e) Gujatta   |
| c) Girnar     | f) Allahabad |

3) What is the importance of the Rock Edict XIII in the understanding of the policy of **Dhamma**? Explain in ten lines.

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4) State whether the following statements are True (✓) or False (×).

- i) The fifth Rock Edict introduces the institute of **Dhammamahamattas**. ( )
- ii) The policy of **Dhamma** was an attempt at founding a new religion. ( )
- iii) **Dhamma** preached total non-violence. ( )

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## 21.8 LET US SUM UP

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Our sources of information about Asoka's **Dhamma** are his inscriptions on the basis of which we can say that Asoka preached non-violence, toleration and social responsibility. He followed these precepts in his administrative policy. It has to be noted that **Dhamma** cannot be equated with Buddhism. It was a set of principles gleaned from various religious traditions and was implemented to hold the empire together.

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## 21.9 KEY WORDS

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**Anusamyana:** Asoka refers Major Rock Edict III to **anusamyana** or 'tours of inspection' which some categories of officials had to undertake once every five years for expounding **Dhamma** and for official work.

**Commercial classes :** Section of society engaged in the activity of trade and exchange as distinct from those who are engaged in activities of production.

**Dhammayatras:** Asoka's predecessors used to **vihara-yatras** for hunting and other royal pleasures. After his visit to Bodhgaya Asoka gave up **vihara-yatras** and took up **dhammayatras**. **Dhammayatras** or 'excursions of **Dhamma**' gave him opportunities to expound **Dhamma** and come into direct contact with different sections of people to spread the ideas of **dhamma**.

**Eclectic:** Borrowing freely from diverse ideas and philosophies.

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## 21.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec. 21.2 and Sub-secs. 21.2.1 to 21.2.3. Your answer should broadly cover the new social, economic and political conditions which gave rise to the need felt by the state for a new ethical principle.
- 2) i)  ii)  iii)
- 3) See Sec. 21.4. Your answer could perhaps keep in mind varied and different kinds of social forces which the king had to keep together.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 21.5
- 2) Check their location with the Map in Unit 18.
- 3) See Sec. 21.5. Your answer could perhaps indicate as to how this edict hints at a culmination of Asoka's thought processes.
- 4) i)  ii)  iii)