

The Ashokan Minor Rock Edict in Bahapur, Delhi

Debyani Mukherjee*

Abstract

The major purpose of writing this research paper is to analyse why the Minor Rock Edict of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka has been engraved on a small hillock of Bahapur only, near Srinivaspuri in Kalkaji, Delhi. Initially this site came to the notice of a contractor of Delhi, Shri Jung Bahadur, who came to the inscribed rock which was planned to be blasted for the development of a residential colony nearby. Later, this contractor informed about this site to the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Cutting down the hiatus of the time, Shri M.C. Joshi and Shri B.M. Pande of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) visited that spot along with Shri Jang Bahadur Singh on 23rd March 1966. The inscription was identified as an Ashokan epigraph by Joshi and Pande soon after conducting a survey on this site. In 2021, the site was visited by me so that I could shed some light over the significance of this isolated rock inscription of Ashoka, as to why this inscription was engraved by the artisan at this specific site only. For this, the site was carefully analysed and the links of the same with the Mauryan age hearth and well, that were unearthed in the series of excavations in Purana Qila, were also established. Conclusions were also drawn to answer the above-mentioned question that arose. The ASI has mentioned in their information board that this place was once the trade route in Mauryan Age. In this regard I have tried to hunt up for the answers. So, have a look for the answers that I came up with in this research paper.

Keywords: Ashoka, epigraph, Archaeological survey, inscription, Minor Rock Edict, Mauryan age

INTRODUCTION

The Ashokan Rock Edicts have remained (and, are) very crucial epigraphical sources to educate ourselves about his socio-political as well as religious policies. His edicts are broadly divided into 2 categorisations, that are enlisted below:

1. Rock Edicts, which are further divided as Major Rock Edicts and Minor Rock Edicts.
2. Pillar Edicts, which are further classified as Major Pillar Edicts and Minor Pillar Edicts

At this juncture, archaeologists have revealed 14 Major Rock Edicts, 3 Minor Rock Edicts, 7 Major Pillar Edicts and 5 Minor Pillar Edicts (Sarnath Minor Pillar Edict, Queen Edict, Schism Pillar Edict, Rummindei Pillar Edict and Nigalisagar Edict).

Basically, these Major and Minor Rock Edicts are several charters deployed in various phases. In simpler terms, in one place, only one or two charters can be found whereas in the other places, a complete set of charters can be found. For instance, in case of Major Rock Edict, the Junagarh Rock Inscription of Gujarat has the complete set of 14 Major Rock Edicts whereas the Nala Sopara Rock Inscription of Maharashtra contains only the fragments of 8th and 9th Major Rock Edicts. Similarly, in case of Minor Rock Edicts, in the Brahmagiri Inscription of Karnataka, Minor Edicts 1 and 2 have been revealed whereas in the Calcutta-Bairat Inscription of West Bengal,

*Author for Correspondence

Debyani Mukherjee

Student, Department of Anthropology, IGNOU, Maidan Garhi, New Delhi, India

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only the 3rd Minor Rock Edict has been unveiled. Coming to the Pillar Edicts of Ashoka, the Minor Pillar Edicts are classified as the Schism Pillar Edicts (found in Sarnath, Prayagraj and Sanchi); the Queen's Edicts (of Prayagraj), the Rummidei Pillar Edict of Lumbini in Nepal and the Nigali Sagar Pillar Inscription of Nepal. As far as the Major Pillar Edicts are concerned, Major Pillar Edicts 1–6 are obtained from Delhi-Meerut, Prayagraj, Lauriya- Nandangarh, Lauriya- Araraj and Rampurwa Pillar Inscription, whereas the only Major Pillar Edict containing the entire set of Major Pillar Edict 1–7 is the Delhi-Topra Pillar Inscription.

So, in these ways, the Major-Minor Rock and Pillar Edicts of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka have been located over vast geographical regions. Not only these, but some of the Rock Edicts have also been found from Pakistan and Afghanistan too.

However, my research topic revolves around the Minor Rock Edicts of Ashoka with special reference to the Bahapur Rock Edict of Srinivasपुरi in Kalkaji, Delhi, so I would like to draw attention towards this Minor Rock Edict of Ashoka.

THE MINOR ROCK EDICTS OF ASHOKA

As mentioned earlier, specifically three Minor Rock Edicts were introduced by the emperor at various places. In Minor Rock Edict 1, Ashoka tries to regard himself as a Buddhist *Upasaka*. He also explains that in the beginning only, he was not much inclined towards *Sangha*, but later in his life, after adopting the Buddhism sect, he became closer to the Sangha, establishing a rapport with the same. Thus, Buddhist doctrine and the monastic order have influenced him abundantly.

Minor Rock Edict 2 appears in a few places combinedly with Minor Edict No.1. Minor Rock Edict 3 only appears at Bairat in Rajasthan. In this Edict, Ashoka claims that by now he has immense faith in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and enlists some Buddhist scriptures that all the Buddhist monks and the laity should sincerely study.

It is beyond any doubt that these Minor Rock Edicts reflected a Buddhist cause [1]. As a reformer, the emperor, the keyword of the new world taught by him was the *Dhamma* [1]. The Marxist historian Romila Thapar in her book '*Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*' has included the translations of the Minor Rock Edicts 1 and 2 of Ashoka [2]. As far as the Minor Rock Edict 3 is concerned, the translations of its contents can be traced in '*Inscriptions of Asoka*' by E. Hultzsch [3].

Table 1 provides a list of Minor Rock Edicts of Ashoka and their respective locations

Table 1. Location of the Minor Rock Edicts

Places where minor rock edicts are located	Minor rock edicts (in number)
1. Bahapur, Delhi	Minor Edict 1 only
2. Gurjarra, Madhya Pradesh	Minor Edict 1 only
3. Saru Maru, Madhya Pradesh	Minor Edict 1 only
4. Udegolam, Karnataka	Minor Edicts 1 and 2
5. Nittur, Karnataka	Minor Edicts 1 and 2
6. Maski, Karnataka	Minor Edict 1 only
7. Siddapur, Karnataka	Minor Edicts 1 and 2
8. Brahmagiri, Karnataka	Minor Edicts 1 and 2
9. Jatinga-Rameshwara, Karnataka	Minor Edicts 1 and 2
10. Palkigundu and Gavimath, Karnataka	Minor Edict 1 only
11. Rajula Mandagiri, Karnataka	Minor Edict 1 only
12. Yerragudi, Andhra Pradesh	Minor Edicts 1 and 2
13. Sasaram, Bihar	Minor Edict 1 only

14. Rupnath, Madhya Pradesh	Minor Edict 1 only
15. Ratampurwa, Uttar Pradesh	Minor Edict 1 only
16. Calcutta Bairat, found from Bairat in Rajasthan but currently kept in the museum of Asiatic Society of Bengal in West Bengal	Minor Edict 3 only (only inscription with Minor Rock Edict 3)
17. Ahraura, Uttar Pradesh	Minor Edict 1 only
18. Kandahar Bilingual Rock Inscription (Chehel Zina Edict), Kandahar, Afghanistan	Minor Edict 4 only. It contains a summary or introduction of the Minor Edicts of Ashoka.

CASE STUDY-THE BAHAPUR MINOR ROCK EDICT, DELHI

It is very pertinent to mention here that the Minor Rock Edict of Ashoka in Delhi for a long time remained away from the eyes of the jam-packed crowd. It is in the recent years only, that the curtains have been lifted from this hidden inscriptional edict of the Mauryan Emperor. Therefore, it is the very recently discovered Minor Rock Edict of Ashoka that contains the Minor Rock Edict 1. In this regard let us first examine how this edict came into the surface and how it gained importance in recent times.

This inscription is basically engraved on a hillock of the Aravallis in the village of Bahapur. However, the inscription lies inside a local park adjacent to the ISKCON Temple in Garhi, East of Kailash in Delhi. The inscription was first noticed by a contractor of Delhi named *Shri Jang Bahadur Singh*, who was instructed to root off the conglomeration of the boulders by blasting them off for constructing a residential colony. He informed about this to the Archaeological. Survey of India (ASI). Sooner, *Shri M.C. Joshi and Shri B.M. Pande* of the Archaeological. Survey of India (ASI) visited that spot along with *Shri Jang Bahadur Singh* on 23rd March 1966. The inscription was identified as an Ashokan epigraph by *Joshi and Pande*, thus regarding the same as one of the Minor Rock Edicts of Asoka (c. 273-232 BCE). From their visit, they made the following observations back in 1966 [4]:

1. They found that the inscription was engraved on a slightly tilted rock-face
2. The total area of inscription is 75 cm in length and 76 cm in height.
3. Each line was longer than the preceding one.
4. A letter, on an average, was about 5 cm. in height.
5. Uniformity of the spacing in the letters and the words was spotted.
6. The inscription is badly damaged in the middle of the inscribed area.
7. The lines 6th, 7th, and 8th were mutilated towards the left.
8. In this inscription, the characters of the Asokan Brahmi are slightly elongated in form, in which some letters bear weird shapes. These were either due to a novice scribe or the hard medium in which he could not properly work [5].

The Bahapur Edict was recorded as the 14th epigraphic version, claims the renowned historian, *Rana Safvi*.

MY OWN OBSERVATIONS DURING MY VISIT TO THIS MINOR ROCK EDICT

On my visit to this Minor Rock Edict of Bahapur, Delhi back in 12th March 2021, I have recorded few major observations, that can be encapsulated as under:

1. The inscription lies over a rugged and smooth surfaced Aravalli hillock boulder.
2. The entire Minor Rock Edict has been meticulously preserved inside a huge grill cage-like structure with a locked door.
3. The writing over this engraved boulder is barely visible, as the edict has started fading away and the approach to this boulder on the hillock is through a well laid path.
4. Most of the parts and contents of the inscription have faded away while some letters (and lines as well) of this Brahmi scripted edict have mutilated.
5. Some cupmarks have also developed over this inscriptional boulder [6].
6. The language of this inscription is Prakrit whereas the script used here is early Brahmi (the Ashokan Brahmi).

7. The line and word spacings were irregular and the lines were not horizontally straight or linear; rather the lines were wiggled and at some points, some words were even overlapped a bit. This also means that either the scribe, who was appointed for engraving the edict, was not a professional in engraving the inscription and hence, he came up with some faulty works or the surface of the medium could have been hard, due to which the scribe couldn't work properly [7].
8. There are ten lines of writing of varying length and some of them were not clearly decipherable.

In Figure 1, we can clearly see the board put up by the ASI and crucialities highlighted by them. In Figure 2, here one can clearly notice that the engravings of the inscription are fading. Also, the lines are not horizontally straight or linear. In Figure 3, we can see an estampage of this inscription.



Figure 1. Information board of the Bahapur Rock Edict of Ashoka.



Figure 2. The side view of the Bahapur Rock Edict. Here it is evident from this image that the inscription is barely visible when peeped from the grill cage. In fact, the inscription is on the verge of fading away. Some lines have also been mutilated. And the boulder has developed cup marks too.



Figure 3. Estampage of the Bahapur Rock Edict, Delhi. This picture appears in the research article ‘A Newly Discovered Inscription of Ashoka at Bahapur, Delhi’ [4].

SOLVING THE MYSTERY: WHY THIS ROCK EDICT WAS FOUND IN THIS LOCATION OF DELHI ONLY?

The major purpose of writing this research paper after surveying the site of Bahapur where the Ashokan edict lies is to question as well as answer the perplexing question as why this rock edict was engraved exactly at this place only? We should always keep in mind the fact that the Mauryan regime under the reigning time span of Mauryan Emperor Ashoka stretched from modern day Bangladesh in the east to modern day Afghanistan in the west of the Indian subcontinent. And of course, we also find the mention of major trade routes prevailing during the ruling period of Emperor Ashoka [8].

One of the major reasons why this Minor Rock Edict was erected exactly at this place of Delhi was because this place of Delhi fell into the major trade routes of the Uttarapath. The route of Uttarapath extended from Balkh in Afghanistan to Tamralipti in West Bengal, India. The route of Uttarapath, regarded as the Himavatapath according to Book 2 of Arthashastra, was further bifurcated into two sub-routes:

1. *Northern Sector:* This was, which stretched from Lahore, Jalandhar, Saharanpur to Bijnor, Gorakhpur, Patliputra and then Tamralipti.
2. *Southern Sector:* This stretched from Lahore to Delhi, Hastinapur, Varanasi, Prayagraj, Patliputra and Rajgir [9].

So, it was possible that Delhi fell into the southern sector of the Uttarapath route that time. Apart from this, it is very noteworthy to pinpoint that the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka tried his best to propagate the credentials of Buddhism and Dhamma as well as the doctrines of Samgha throughout

the Indian subcontinent and other nations (geographically present) at that time. And for this reason, the major trade routes were chosen to spread the messages of the Buddha. As a medium to spread the messages of Buddha, this Mauryan Emperor tried his best to put up Rock and Pillar Edicts along the major trade routes present during the Mauryan times so that it would become easier for the travellers and merchants to grasp the same at an ease [10].

Moreover, we don't find any sort of other materialistic evidence related to Buddhism or Mauryan Period from the Bahapur area of Delhi. So, this Minor Rock Edict is the only remain that we find exactly in this area. Howsoever, there are two Major Pillar Edicts located in Delhi: the Delhi- Topra Pillar in Feroze Shah Kotla Fort and the Delhi-Meerut Pillar opposite to the Bara Hindu Rao Hospital. Both pillars were brought by Feroze Shah Tughlaq in Delhi from their original sites Ambala and Meerut respectively.

Furthermore, another significant evidence that I have particularly noticed is the presence of the ring well of 70 cms in diameter of the Mauryan Age unearthed from Purana Qila Excavations along with a Mauryan Age kitchen at the same site. Then it is very much possible that this specific site of Purana Qila functioned as some resting site or inn at the time of Emperor Ashoka that was meant for the merchants and travellers passing through Delhi, as the modern-day route passing through Purana Qila merges to the Mathura Road at present. It is possible that the merchants and travellers went from this exact location to reach Mathura. That also means that this was a major site that was located on that southern sector of the Uttarapath trade route.

Secondly, one more interesting thing that I have noted is that the route from Purana Qila to Mathura, though not directly, includes the area of Bahapur alongwith Okhla majorly. So, it can be possible that while passing through Okhla, the ministers of Ashoka might have hunted up for a place where they can put up an edict and thus, they came up with the option of the Aravali hillock present in the vicinity of Bahapur Village. This is the reason as to why we find the Minor Rock Edict of Ashoka near Bahapur Village close to East of Kailash in Delhi and a fact that can be inferred from all the above-mentioned points is that the place held a significant location even at the time of the emperor Ashoka, hence.

CONCLUSION

Thus, as the conclusive part of this research paper, it could be fetched out that the major reason behind putting up this rock edict in this place of Delhi is only because this place lied on the major trade routes during the reigning period of the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka. Through this research paper, I have tried to trace as well as expand the correct trade route also. Factual evidence can also be pinpointed that through this entire trade route, only the region of Bahapur had the congregation of large boulders and no other place of this trade route in Delhi had such geographical features. For example, the regions of Purana Qila, Okhla, East of Kailash, Noida, and other related places, do not have any rock formations. But yes, one point to be noted, and that is, the place where the Kalkaji Temple lies is over a hillock. But this place, if we located the route chronologically place wise, falls after Bahapur. So, this could be possible for the artisans that they found the region of Bahapur in the first place-before the Kalkaji Temple hillock- and this is the reason as to why they came up with such a decision, ie, to put up a minor rock edict of the emperor at this place only, hence.

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