

The Ashoka Tablet -- India's ancient Animal Welfare & Animal Veterinary Legislation

Recently, while on a tour of Junagadh arranged by the Forest Department of Gujarat following the CBSG RSG meeting and SAZARC, a group of us, zoo people from different countries had an opportunity to visit the boulder at the foot of Mount Girnar which displays the actual Inscription of Asoka Rudradaman and Skanda gupta. This monument is often referred as the Ashoka stone or Ashoka Tablet and is historical evidence of the great ruler's compassion as well as power, for the edicts have had immeasurable impact on the moral and ethical mores of the region.

The literature describing the stone refers to it as one of three scripts in the same place over 7centuries from 3rd to 5th century A.D, e.g. Asoka's 14 edicts (273 BC), Mahaksatrapa Rudradaman (150 AD) and Gupta King Skandagupta (456-7 AD). Ashoka's edits are written in Brahmi alphabet which evolved into the Devanagari script, the language resembling both Sanskrit and Ceylonese Buddhist. The Asoka edicts are written on the NE face of the boulder. They are written in the Brahmi alphabet which gave rise to the Devanagari script. Their language is a form of prakrit closely allied to Sanskrit and the pali of the Ceylonese Buddhist books, but not identical with either. It is said that the carving is not of the best quality and difficult to read but it has been translated. The matter below contains only the edicts and parts thereof dealing with animal welfare.

It was very inspiring to take a group of zoo managers to this spot, although the significance was not completely clear to all. This is, however, a part of a pilgrimage that every person who works with animals should make and give homage to the ancient ruler who established a tradition of animal welfare in the subcontinent.

(I Edict) This edict on morality has been caused to be written by King Devanampriya Priyadarsin. Here **no living being should be killed and sacrificed.** And no festival meeting should be held. For King Devanampriya Priyadarsin sees much evil in festival meetings. But there are also some festival meetings which are considered meritorious by King Devanampriya Priyadarsin. **Formerly in the kitchen of King Devanampriya Priyadarsin many hundred thousands of animals were killed daily for the sake of curry. But now, when this rescript on morality is written, only three animals are being killed (daily) for the sake of curry, (viz.) two peacock (and) one deer, (but) even this deer not regularly. Even these three animals shall not be killed in future.**

(II Edict) Everywhere in the dominions of king Devanampriya Priyadarsin, ... two (kinds of) medical treatment were established by king Devanampriya Priyadarsin, (viz.), **medical treatment for men and medical treatment for cattle.**

And wherever there were no herbs that are beneficial to men and beneficial to cattle, everywhere they were caused to be imported and planted. Wherever there were no roots and fruits, everywhere they were caused to be imported and to be planted. **On the roads wells were caused to be dug, and trees were caused to be planted for the use of cattle and men.**

(III Edict) King Devanampriya Priyadarsin speaks thus:- ... Meritorious is obedience to mother and father. Liberality to friends, acquaintances and relatives, to Brahmauns and Bramanas is meritorious. **Abstention from killing animals is meritorious. ...**

(IV Edict) In times past for, many hundreds of years, there had even been promoted the killing of animals and the hurting of living beings, discourtesy to relatives, ... there are now promoted, through the instruction in morality ..., **abstention from killing animals, abstention from hurting living beings, etc. ...**

Related by Sally Walker, Editor Emeritus



SAZARC participants (partially in frame) at the Ashoka Tablet in old Junagadh, Gujarat.