ASHOKA’S POLICY OF
DHAMMA

Historical Background
Introduction

• Ashoka the son of Bindusara succeeded to the Mauryan throne in 269 C.E
• Until about a100 years ago he was merely one of the many king mentioned in the Mauryan dynasty list
• In 1837 James Princep deciphered an inscription in Brahmi script of a king name Devanampiya Piyadasi (Beloved of God)
• Later many such inscriptions were discovered
• In 1915, another version of the edicts was discovered in which the king called himself Devanampiya Ashoka
• That established the fact that both the name were of the same king, Ashoka
• Ashoka was regarded as one of the greatest king of the ancient world
• His greatness lays not in the vastness of his empire but primarily in his character and the principles and ideals for which he strove
• His only conquest was that of Kalinga (Odisha) which he undertook 8 years after his accession
• Though victorious, the scene of the battle field haunted him
• His remorse make him to find solace in Buddhism
• He got converted to Buddhism and contributed greatly in its spread in India and aboard
• This ultimately turned him to Dhamma
• *Dhamma* is the Prakrit form of the Sanskrit word *Dharma*

• It has been variously translated as piety, moral life, righteousness

• But it must be clearly understood that it was not any particular religious faith or practices

• To understand its various aspects and reason for formulation it is necessary to sketch its historical background
Socio-Economic background

• Mauryas period witnessed a change in the economic structure
• Use of iron, resulting in surplus production which in turn led to development of trade
• Changeover took place from a simple rural economy to a pattern of economy in which towns and cities played an important part
• The emergence of urban culture by its very logic demanded a more flexible social organisation
• The commercial class had come to the forefront
• Incorporation of tribes and people from the outlaying areas into the social fabric resulted into some problem
• Rigidity of the four fold *varna* division
• The commercial class were denied a higher status
• The rigidity sharpened the division in the society
• It was this situation which Ashoka inherited when he ascended the throne
• Therefore in an effort to solve some of these problem that a complex society faced he introduced the policy of *Dhamma*
Religious Background

• Brahmanical hold over society came under increasing attack
• The privileges of the priests, rigidity of caste and elaborate rituals were being questioned
• Existence of other religious sects, such as Buddhism, Jainism and Ajivikas
• Brahmanism still continued to have a strong hold
• As a result hostility prevail
• To bring about harmony and mutual trust it is necessary to introduce policy that will be acceptable to all
Political Background

• State had grown very elaborate and complex
• Political supremacy of one region (Magadha) over a vast territory
• Comprised of many previous kingdoms and areas where no organised states had existed before
• Existence within this vast territory, various geographical regions, multiple culture and diverse faiths, beliefs and practices
• Monopoly of force by a ruling class of which the king was the supreme head
• Existence of an administrative apparatus
• Appropriation of a very substantial quantity of surplus from agriculture, commerce and other sources
Conclusion

• The complexity of the state system having diverse economy, religion and social structure required an imaginative policy with minimal use of force
• It could not be controlled by an army alone
• A feasible policy is needed which could reach to all section of the society
• That policy of *Dhamma* is such an endeavour