Ashoka, the Great

Why in news?

Three Ashokan era edicts were recently found in Delhi.

Who is Ashoka, the Great?

- **Parents-** Mauryan King Bindusara and Devi Dhamma.
- **Year-** 273 BC - 232 BC
- In the initial phase of his life, Ashoka was a cruel and ruthless king. He applied brutal ideas to expand his kingdom.
- **Patron of Buddhism-** In 265 BC, he won the battle of Kalinga and after seeing the bloodsheds he had a change of heart. He started to follow the path of non-violence and Buddhism.
- He also made *Buddhism as State religion* around 260 BC.
- **3rd Buddhist Council**- It was held at *Pataliputra (250 BC)* under the patronage of King Ashoka and Chairman is *Moggaliputta Tissa.*
- Compilation of *Abhidhamma Pitaka* took place at this council.
- **Edicts -** Ashoka started to preach dhamma and wrote his philosophy through 14 edicts that spread throughout the empire. These were known as Ashokan edicts.
- *Great Sanchi Stupa* was inscribed as a World Heritage Site by UNECSO in 1989.
- **Sarnath Pillar**- The Ashokan Pillar at Sarnath has a four-lion capital, which was later adopted as the *national emblem* of the Indian republic post independence.

Mauryan Empire
• The Maurya Empire (322 – 185 B.C.E.), ruled by the Mauryan dynasty, was a geographically extensive and powerful political and military empire in ancient India. • Chandragupta Maurya founded 322 BCE after overthrowing the Nanda Dynasty. • Chanakya (also known as Kautilya and Vishnugupta) who wrote Arthashastra was the political mentor of Chandragupta Maurya • Ashoka is the 3rd ruler of Mauryan Empire.

What are the edicts and inscriptions of Ashoka?

All rock edicts are inscriptions but all inscriptions are not rock edicts

- **Edicts-** It is a decree or announcement of law, which can be under any official authority. It can be issued in any number of physical forms
    - Major and Minor Pillar Edicts

    - Major Rock Edicts- 14 edicts (termed 1st to 14th) and two separate ones found in Odisha.
    - Minor Rock Edicts
- **Inscriptions-** It is a text produced by carving the letters into solid surface like stones, coins, buildings and rocks.
    - Major Rock Inscriptions
    - Barabar cave inscriptions and
    - Kandahar bilingual inscription.

What does Ashokan edicts and inscriptions say about?

- **Themes of inscriptions**
    - Ashoka's conversion and his efforts to spread Buddhism,
    - Moral and religious precepts and
    - Social and animal welfare programmes
- In these inscriptions, Ashoka refers himself as "*Beloved Servant of the God" (Devanampiyadasi)*.
- The identification of Devanampiyadasi with Ashoka was confirmed by an inscription at *Maski*, found in the eastern part of India were written in Magadhi Prakrit using the Brahmi script.
- **Edicts**- The Edicts of Ashoka are a collection of 33 inscriptions on the Pillars of Ashoka as well as boulders and cave walls made by the Emperor Ashoka.
- These inscriptions were dispersed throughout the country and it *represents the first tangible evidence of Buddhism*. The edicts describe in detail the Ashoka's view about dhamma, to solve the severe problems faced by the complex society.
- It is mainly on social and moral precepts rather than specific religious practices or the philosophical dimension of Buddhism.

Major Rock Edict	About
I	• Prohibits animal slaughter • Bans festive gatherings
II	• Mentions the South Indian kingdoms such as Cholas, Pandya, Satyaputas and Keralaputras. • Deals with social welfare measures
III	• Liberty to Brahmanas Every five years Yukatas, Pradesikas along with Rajukas. • To visit all the areas of the kingdom to spread Dhamma.
IV	• Preference of Dhammaghosa (Sound of peace) over Berighosa (Sound of wandrums). • Impact of Dhamma on society
V	• Humane treatment of slaves by their masters. • Mentions about the appointment of Dhamma Mahamatras.
VI	• Deals with the welfare measures King's wish to know about the condition of the people
VII	• Tolerance towards all religions and sects

VIII	• Mentions about Ashoka's visit to Bodh Gaya and Bodhi tree • Maintaining contact with rural people via Dhammayatras
IX	• Stresses on the moral conduct of people. • Avoiding expensive ceremonies
X	• Condemns the desire for fame and glory
XI	• Elaborate explanation of Dhamma
XII	• Appeal for developing tolerance towards all religious sects
XIII	• Explains about Kalinga war and conquest through dhamma
XIV	• Deals with the purpose of engraving inscriptions in various parts of the country

Pillar Edict	About
I	• Ashoka's principle of protecting his people
II	• Defines Dhamma as minimum of sins, many virtues, compassion, liberty, truthfulness and purity.
III	• Avoiding practices of cruelty, sin, harshness, pride and anger among his subjects.
IV	• Responsibilities of the Rajukas.
V	• List of animals and birds that should not be killed on certain days. • Another list mentions animals that should never be killed. • Describes release of 25 prisoners. • This pillar edict is also known as Delhi-Topra Pillar Edict.
VI	Dhamma policy of the State (welfare of the people).
VII	Ashoka's work for fulfilling Dhamma. Tolerance for all sects. Also, about Dhamma Mahamatta

Inscription / Edict	About
Allahabad – Kosam/Queens Edict/Kausambi or Schism Edict	Ashoka asks the members of the Sangha to refrain from causing division in the ranks.
Kandahar Inscription	It is a famous bilingual edict in Greek and Aramaic.
Kalinga Edict	Mentions "all men are my children"

What is Ashoka's policy of Dhamma?

- The word dhamma is the Pali form of the Sanskrit word *dharma*.
- **Aim** - To create a harmonious atmosphere in the state where all people irrespective of their religious and cultural diversities, lived in peace and harmony.
- **Ahimsa-** Ban on animal sacrifices, it reduced killing of animals for food in the royal kitchen.
- **Good conduct**- It emphasised on good conduct and social responsibilities that were part of dhamma.
    - Proper courtesy to slaves and servants

    - Respectful behaviour towards elders
    - Restrain in one’s dealing with all living beings.

- **Gift of dhamma**-
    - Obedience to mother and father
    - Liberality towards friends, relatives, acquaintances and relatives
- **Mutual respect**- Religious toleration
- **Dhamma as a king**-
    - To promote welfare of the people
    - Discharge the debt he owes to all beings
    - Ensure people’s happiness in this world
    - Renunciation of warfare

Reference

1. Indian Express- 3 Ashokan era edicts in Delhi

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
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