

# Brief Overview of Fourteen Major Rock Edicts of King Ashoka

**Maitreya Yeshwant Ovhal**

Independent Researcher, Msc. (Zoology), MA (History) , Diploma – Buddhist Studies and Vipassana.

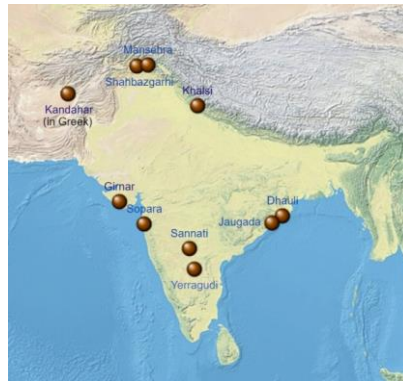
## ABSTRACT

The fourteen major rock edicts are of great use to study the historiography of Ashoka's Empire. These major rock edicts contain engraved information about the nature of his patronage given to Buddhism and his interpretation of Dhamma. These edicts also throw the light upon the Ashoka's administration, international relations, and law and order systems of his empire. The major rock edicts of the Ashoka are like the identity cards of his empire. These major rock edicts are distributed all over Indian subcontinent and can also be found in Afghanistan & Pakistan. Arguably these major rock edicts encapsulate the boundaries of ancient Mauryan Empire and found at those locations which are specifically chosen by King Ashoka for their construction. The location for the construction of these major rock edicts is arguably chosen on the basis of importance of the area, trade & population of that area. Every Major rock edict has a specific message engraved upon it and there is uniformity in the content of these rock edicts with addition of minor separate edicts which are found at Dhauili and Jaugada & there is little deviation which can be observed at Sannati where rock edict number 13 is replaced by a separate rock edict. Ashoka was the first king who has initiated a dialogue with his subjects by means of engraving such edicts on mighty rocks. By studying this paper you can understand why it is important to have brief knowledge about the contents of these major rock edicts of Ashoka while studying about the King Ashoka in particular & about the Mauryan Empire in general. This paper throws light upon the script and locations of these major rock edicts. This paper also argues about the nature of the patronage given to the Buddhism by King Ashoka and insists upon forming conclusions about the Ashoka's policy of Dhamma solely on the basis of the engraved texts of major rock edicts..

**KEYWORDS:** Dhamma, Fourteen Major rock edict, Ashoka's administration, interpretation of Dhamma, Mauryan Empire.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The major rock edict is mostly a big stone (boulder) which is engraved with the help of chisel and hammer. These major rock edicts can be found at 10 places on the Indian subcontinent and they are engraved and arranged in a group of fourteen big rocks. There is no rule in placing these rocks in a linear or in some other kind of arrangement; however these major rock inscriptions are mostly in the group of fourteen. At some places there are less than 14 major rock edicts found at one place and the primary reason for this can be an erosion and denudation of the rocks or natural rock peeling containing the inscriptions. These major rock edicts are also known as the **sets**. Such sets of major rock edicts are found at places like Girnar (Gujrat), Kalsi (Dehradun), Yerragundi (Andhra Pradesh), Mansehra (Pakistan), Sopara (Maharashtra), Shahpazarhi (Pakistan), Jaugada (Orissa) and Dhauili (Orissa).



*Fig. 1 Locations of Major Rock Edicts (source – Wikipedia)*

The script and language of these major rock edicts shows signs of being influenced by the regional culture & language of the region in which they are inscribed. The Ashoka has started engraving these major rock edicts after the completion of 8 years of his rule. These Major rock edicts are not the royal proclamations. Instead major rock edicts are the means of which the King Ashoka has established a primary dialogue with his subjects and represented himself as an upholder of Dhamma and being the beloved to the gods.

## 2. BRIEF OVERVIEW

### 1. Major Rock Edict of Kandahar -

The Kandahar Major Rock edict is present in the district of Kandahar in the country Afghanistan. This major rock edict talks about the Ashokas Dhamma. The uniqueness of the Kandahar Major Rock edict is its bilingualism. This rock edict is inscribed in Aramaic and Greek Languages. This rock edict is considered to be the earliest of the Ashokas major rock inscriptions. Presently only portions of rock edicts 12 and 13 are left and these edicts talk about the incidence of Kalinga war and how that war changed Ashoka. These inscriptions also give information about his Dhamma policy.



*Fig. 2 - Location of Kandahar Major Rock Inscription (Source – Wikipedia)*

### 2. Major rock edict of Shahbaz Garhi -

This rock edict is written from the right to the left. There are two big rocks on which all the 14 rock edicts are engraved. Shahbaz Garhi is one of those few places where we find the entire set of 14 major rock edicts at one place. The rock edict is written in Kharoshthi script. The Shahbaz Garhi rock edict is considered to be the earliest of the major rock edicts of Ashoka. This rock edict is also considered as one of the earliest evidences of writing in South Asia.



**Fig. 3 Shahbaz Garhi Rock inscription (Photo by Roman Bruehwiler)**

**3. The major rock edict of Mansehra –**

The Mansehra major rock edicts are engraved on three large boulders. The edict is written from right to left in Kharoshti script. (World Heritage Centre. UNESCO). The major rock edicts of Mansehra talks about expansion of Buddhism & Ashokas Dhamma.



**Fig. 4 Mansehra Rock Edicts (Author – Muhammad Zahir)**

**4. The major rock edict of Kalsi –**

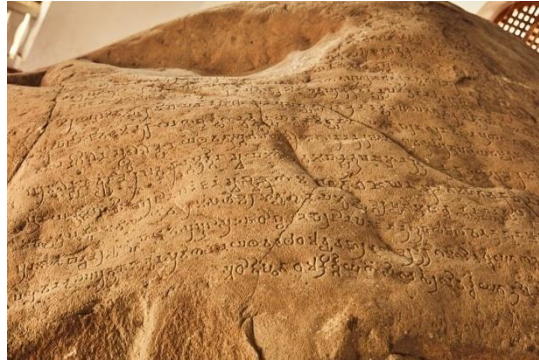
It is the only place in north India where we find 14 rock edicts at one place. The names of five Greek Kings are inscribed on the Kalsi Rock Edict. From Kalsi in Uttarakhand the spread of Buddhism has taken place to Tibet. In the 3rd century BC, Kalsi used to be the seat of dhamma, where under the patronage of Asoka, various missionary activities were carried out to spread Buddhism. (Historian MP Joshi, in his ‘Journal of Himalayan Studies’). The major rock edict at Kalsi shows the engraving of a royal elephant which is distinguishing feature of a Kalsi rock edict of Ashoka.



**Fig. 5 Engravings of Kalsi Rock Edict (Author - Archaeological Survey of India Vol. 1, p.247 by Cunningham, Alexander)**

### 5. Major Rock Edict of Girnar –

Girnar Rock inscriptions are also known as Junagarh rock inscriptions. These rock inscriptions contain inscriptions of Ashoka, Rudradaman I and Skandagupta. There are 14 rock edicts of Ashoka found at the foothill of Girnar hills. The Ashokas inscriptions at Junagarh are considered to be the oldest inscriptions compared to other inscriptions found on the same rock at Junagarh. Ashokas inscription of Junagarh is in Bramhi script and Pali language is considered to be the part of the sets of 14 Major rock edicts of Ashoka.



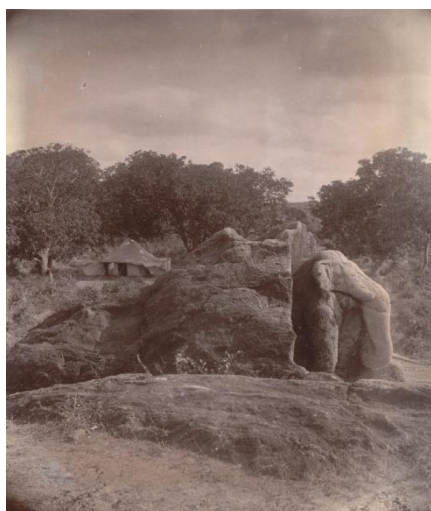
*Fig. 6 Girnar Major rock edict (source – [www.gujarattourism.com](http://www.gujarattourism.com))*

### 6. Major rock edict of Sopara –

The Sopara used to be an ancient port city known as Shurparaka. In mid third century BCE, Emperor Ashoka sent one of his missionaries Dhammarakshita, to Sopara to spread Buddhism in Western India. The Ashokas edict at Sopara is in Bramhi script.

### 7. Major Rock edict of Dhauri –

The most significant feature of the Dhauri site is that it has a depiction of monumental elephant. In Dhauri rock edict king Ashoka expresses his remorse of the Kalinga war and clarifies his intention to govern the kingdom according to the principles of Dhamma. At Dhauri, both the Ashokan inscription and the Elephant are engraved on the same rock.

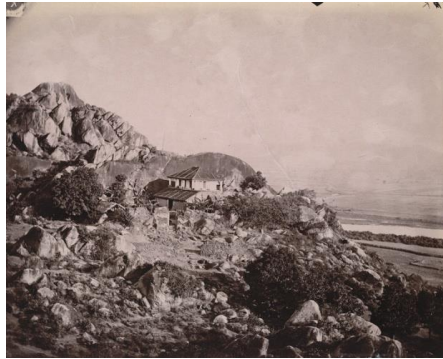


*Fig. 7 Ashoka inscription rock (Photo - Alexander E. Caddy in 1895)*



### 8. Major Rock Edict of Jaugada -

The Jaugada rock edicts mentions Ashoka's brutal and gory conquest of Kalinga and his subsequent remorse at the suffering of people. Jaugada rock edict can be designated as a confession rock edict of king Ashoka. The edict no. 11, 12 & 13 which mention Ashoka's brutal and gory conquest are omitted and instead of them the two edicts are introduced to spread the doctrine of Dhamma.



*Fig. 8 Jaugada major rock edict site (Photo - Joseph David Beglar in 1874-76)*

### 9. Major rock edict of Yerragudi –

The Yerragudi rock edict mentions about the principles of Dhamma. The encriptions are in Bramhi script and Prakrit language. The significant feature of the yerragudi rock inscriptions is that these inscriptions advocate welfare of the wildlife.



*Fig. 9 the Ashoka rock edict site at Yerragudi in Kurnooldistrict. Photo: U. Subramanyam)*

### 10. Major rock edict of Sannati –

The Sannati rock edict site is the only site which contains a rock portrait of the king Ashoka. This rock edict is in Bramhi script. The rock edicts I & II available in Dhauli are found in Sannati as well.



*Fig. 10 Stone portrait of Ashoka at Sannati (Photo Credit: Kumar Buradikatti )*

### 3. LOCATION AND PRESENCE

KING ASHOKAS MAJOR ROCK EDICTS ARE FOUND IN SETS OF FOURTEEN AT 10 LOCATIONS			
Sr. No.	Locations	Places	Rock Edict Number
1	Mansehra	Pakistan	<i>Rock edict number 1 to 14 is found here.</i>
2	Shahbazgarhi	Pakistan	<i>Rock edict number 1 to 14 is found here.</i>
3	Kandahar	Afghanistan	<i>Rock Edict number 13 &amp; 14 is found here.</i>
4	Khalsi	Uttarakhand	<i>Rock edict number 1 to 14 is found here.</i>
5	Girnar	Gujarat	<i>Rock edict number 1 to 14 is found here.</i>
6	Sopara	Maharashtra	<i>Rock edict number 8 &amp; 9 is found here.</i>
7	Dhauili	Odisha	<i>Rock edict number 1 to 10 &amp; 14th rock edict is found here.</i>
8	Jaugada	Odisha	<i>Rock edict number 1 to 10 &amp; 14th rock edict is found here.</i>
9	Sannati	Karnataka	<i>Rock edict number 12 &amp; 14 is found here.</i>
10	Yerragudi	Andhra Pradesh	<i>Rock edict number 1 to 14 is found here.</i>

### 4. CONCLUSION

Ashokas Major Rock Edicts are his identity makers for the historians and students. These Major rock edicts contain information regarding some of his core state policies. These inscriptions change in their script and languages but the core message of these edicts is identical. It is important to interpret the personality of Ashoka, his understanding of Dhamma, and his ambitions as a ruler within the confines of 14 Major rock edicts as these rock edicts are the material evidences and hence serve the purpose of interpretation & validation of the historical narrative of Ashoka as king and his reign. Some of the Major rock edicts represent very peculiar features which are specific and unique to those rock edicts. Such peculiarity symbolizes the dynamism and inclination towards expressiveness for conveying the Ashokas message of Dhamma through those rock edicts. The major rock edicts do not express core ideas of Nivarvana or Noble 8 fold Path. However these rock edicts do express the general doctrine of Dhamma as adopted and understood by the Ashoka and interprets his understanding of Dhamma to those who study these Major rock Edicts.

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