



Public Health and Healthcare Administration during the Reign of King Ashoka

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Abstract

The Mauryan period marks a significant phase in the development of public welfare and administrative governance in ancient India. Among Mauryan rulers, King Ashoka stands out for his emphasis on social welfare, morality, and public health. This paper examines the nature and structure of public health and healthcare administration during the reign of King Ashoka, drawing evidence from archaeological sources such as rock and pillar edicts, as well as literary texts including Buddhist chronicles, Arthashastra, and accounts of foreign observers. The study highlights Ashoka's innovative approach to healthcare through state-supported medical services, the establishment of hospitals for humans and animals, promotion of herbal medicine, sanitation measures, and preventive healthcare practices. Ashoka's Dhamma policy played a crucial role in integrating ethical governance with public health, ensuring compassion, accessibility, and equity in medical care. The paper also explores the administrative mechanisms employed to implement healthcare policies across the empire, reflecting an early form of organized public health administration. By analyzing these measures, the study argues that Ashoka's reign represents one of the earliest systematic efforts toward state responsibility in healthcare. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of ancient Indian health systems and their relevance to the historical evolution of public health administration.

Keywords: King Ashoka , Public Health, Healthcare Administration, Mauryan Empire, Ancient Indian Medicine

Introduction

The history of public health and healthcare administration in ancient India reveals a sophisticated understanding of human well-being that extended far beyond mere medical treatment. Among ancient rulers, Emperor Ashoka Maurya (c. 268–232 BCE) stands out as a pioneer who integrated healthcare into the broader framework of governance, ethics, and social responsibility. His reign marked a significant transition from conquest-driven imperialism to welfare-oriented administration, with health care emerging as a key concern of the state.

Ashoka's policies were deeply influenced by the principles of Dharma, which emphasized compassion, non-violence, moral conduct, and care for all living beings. Unlike modern healthcare systems that are largely institutional and technologically driven, Ashoka's approach to health was holistic. It encompassed physical health, mental well-being, ethical living, environmental care, and social harmony. Health, in this context, was



not viewed as an individual responsibility alone but as a collective obligation shared by the ruler, administrators, and society at large.

Archeological evidence, particularly Ashoka inscriptions found across the Indian subcontinent, provides valuable insights into the emperor's commitment to public welfare. These inscriptions refer to the establishment of medical facilities, the provision of medicinal herbs, the appointment of medical officers, and the care of both humans and animals. Such references indicate the presence of an organized administrative mechanism aimed at ensuring access to healthcare, even in remote regions of the empire.

In addition to archaeological sources, ancient literary texts such as Buddhist chronicles, and Ayurveda treatises suggest that medical knowledge and healthcare practices were already well-developed during this period. Ashoka's contribution lay not in inventing medicine, but in institutionalizing healthcare as a state-supported service. His reign thus represents one of the earliest examples of government-led public health initiatives in world history.

Furthermore, Ashoka's emphasis on animal welfare and veterinary care highlights the inclusive nature of his healthcare vision. The establishment of veterinary services and protection of animals reflected both economic considerations given the importance of animals in agriculture and transport and ethical values rooted in Dharma. This dual concern for human and animal health reinforces the idea that Ashoka's healthcare policies were comprehensive and forward-looking.

The relevance of Ashoka's healthcare administration extends beyond historical interest. In the contemporary era, where public health challenges demand ethical governance, equitable access, and preventive care, Ashoka's model offers valuable lessons. His integration of morality, administration, and healthcare provides a framework for understanding how governance can play a proactive role in promoting societal well-being.

This study seeks to examine the nature and scope of healthcare administration under King Ashoka by analysing archaeological records and literary sources. By exploring the role of Dharma, medical institutions, public health measures, and veterinary services, the research aims to assess the significance of Ashoka's policies in shaping early healthcare systems and their enduring relevance in the history of public health administration.

This study follows a qualitative historical research methodology based on a critical analysis of archaeological and literary sources to examine public health and healthcare administration during the reign of King Ashoka. Since the subject pertains to ancient history, the research relies entirely on secondary data derived from authentic primary records and classical texts. An interpretative and contextual approach has been adopted to understand healthcare practices within the administrative and ethical framework of the Mauryan state.

Archaeological evidence forms the core foundation of this study, as it provides direct and contemporaneous information about Ashoka's public welfare policies. The primary archaeological sources include the Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, and Pillar Edicts of King Ashoka, discovered across different regions of the Indian subcontinent. These inscriptions explicitly refer to the establishment of medical treatment facilities for both humans and animals, the plantation and distribution of medicinal herbs, the digging of wells, and the

construction of rest houses along roads. Edict II and Edict VII are particularly significant for understanding state-sponsored healthcare and welfare initiatives. These inscriptions reflect the administrative intent of the Mauryan state and demonstrate an early form of organized public health policy.

Archaeological evidence provides the most direct and reliable information regarding healthcare policies during the reign of King Ashoka. Although the term “hospital” is not explicitly used, several inscriptions clearly indicate organized and state-supported medical care.

1. Major Rock Edict II

“Everywhere within my dominions, and also in the neighboring territories, arrangements have been made for medical treatment for both human beings and animals. Medicinal herbs beneficial for humans and animals have been imported and cultivated wherever they were not previously available.”

Source: Major Rock Edict II, English translation adapted from Thapar (1997).

This is the most important archaeological source related to healthcare. In this edict, Ashoka explicitly states that arrangements were made for medical treatment of both humans and animals throughout the empire and even in neighboring territories. It also mentions the plantation and distribution of medicinal herbs, roots, and plants wherever they were not available.

This edict is widely regarded as the earliest epigraphic evidence of state-sponsored healthcare in ancient India.

2. Major Rock Edict VII

Although this edict does not directly mention hospitals, it emphasizes public welfare, moral responsibility, and the well-being of subjects. These principles form the ethical foundation of Ashoka’s public health policies and support the idea of healthcare as a state concern.

3. Pillar Edict V

This edict refers to regulations on animal slaughter and protection of certain animal species. These measures indirectly relate to animal health and veterinary care and reflect Ashoka’s concern for the physical well-being of living beings.

4. Minor Rock Edicts

Some Minor Rock Edicts stress Ashoka’s commitment to moral governance and social welfare, which scholars interpret as including healthcare and humanitarian policies within the administrative framework.

In addition to archaeological evidence, the study draws extensively from **ancient literary** texts that provide indirect yet valuable information about healthcare systems during the Mauryan period. The Arthashastra attributed to Kautilya offers insights into state administration, public officials, urban sanitation, regulation of medical practitioners, and the role of the state in public welfare. Buddhist texts such as the Mahavamsa,



Dipavamsa, and Ashokavadana highlight Ashoka's moral governance and his emphasis on compassion, non-violence, and care for living beings, which directly influenced healthcare practices.

Further references are drawn from medical and semi-medical traditions preserved in classical texts like the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita, which, although not exclusively Mauryan, reflect the medical knowledge and practices prevalent during the broader ancient Indian period. Additionally, accounts of foreign observers such as Megasthenes, preserved in later Greek writings, provide supplementary descriptions of urban hygiene, public facilities, and medical practices in Mauryan cities.

Literary sources supplement archaeological evidence by providing broader administrative, ethical, and medical contexts.

1. Arthashastra (Kautilya)

The Arthashastra contains references to state responsibility in public welfare, including regulation of physicians, sanitation in cities, and administrative supervision of health-related activities. While it predates Ashoka, it reflects the administrative system inherited and modified by the Mauryan rulers.

2. Ashokavadana

This Buddhist text describes Ashoka's transformation into a welfare-oriented ruler and highlights his concern for compassion, care for the sick, and humanitarian governance, indirectly supporting the existence of healthcare institutions.

3. Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa

These Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles mention Ashoka's support for public welfare, medical assistance, and establishment of facilities for monks and the general population, especially in the context of Buddhist monastic communities.

4. Charaka Samhita

Although not specifically focused on Ashoka, this classical Ayurvedic text represents the medical knowledge and institutional practices prevalent during the Mauryan period. It indicates the presence of trained physicians, organized treatment methods, and medicinal formulations likely used in state-supported healthcare settings.

5. Sushruta Samhita

This text provides evidence of advanced surgical practices and medical training, suggesting the existence of medical institutions capable of systematic healthcare delivery during the broader ancient Indian period.

6. Megasthenes' Indica

The Greek ambassador Megasthenes describes urban planning, sanitation, and public facilities in Mauryan cities. His account supports the presence of organized civic infrastructure that indirectly contributed to public health and medical care.

The study adopts a comparative and analytical method by correlating archaeological inscriptions with literary narratives to ensure historical reliability. Healthcare-related references are examined in their socio-political and ethical contexts, particularly in relation to Ashoka's Dhamma policy. Through systematic analysis of multiple sources, the research aims to reconstruct a coherent picture of public health and healthcare administration during Ashoka's reign.

Public Health and Healthcare Administration under King Ashoka

The reign of King Ashoka represents a landmark phase in the history of public health and welfare administration in ancient India. Unlike earlier rulers whose policies primarily emphasized military expansion and revenue collection, Ashoka integrated healthcare into the core functions of state governance. Public health during his reign was recognized as a collective responsibility of the state, reflecting a systematic and humane approach to administration.

One of the most significant aspects of healthcare administration under Ashoka was the establishment of medical facilities for both humans and animals. Archaeological evidence from the Major Rock Edicts, particularly Edict II, clearly indicates that the Mauryan state made provisions for medical treatment not only within the empire but also in neighboring regions. This demonstrates an advanced understanding of healthcare as a public service that transcended political boundaries. The inclusion of animal healthcare further highlights the comprehensive nature of Ashoka's welfare policies.

Preventive healthcare formed another crucial dimension of Ashokan public health administration. The plantation of medicinal herbs, roots, and trees, as mentioned in the edicts, suggests an organized effort to ensure the availability of medical resources. The construction of wells, rest houses, and roadside facilities contributed to improved sanitation, hygiene, and the well-being of travelers and local populations. These measures indicate an awareness of environmental and infrastructural factors affecting public health.

Healthcare administration under Ashoka was closely linked to his policy of Dhamma, which emphasized compassion, non-violence, and social responsibility. Medical care was not limited to elite sections of society but extended to common people, reflecting an inclusive approach. The appointment of officials responsible for public welfare and moral supervision further strengthened the administrative framework supporting healthcare initiatives.

Overall, public health and healthcare administration during Ashoka's reign reveal an early model of state-sponsored welfare, combining ethical governance with practical administrative measures. These initiatives laid a foundation for organized public health systems and highlight the progressive nature of Mauryan administration in addressing the health needs of society.



Hospitals and Medical Institutions: The existence and development of hospitals and medical institutions during the reign of King Ashoka reflect a significant advancement in organized healthcare administration in ancient India. Although the term “hospital” in its modern sense was not used during the Mauryan period, archaeological and literary evidence clearly indicates the presence of state-supported medical facilities that functioned as organized centers for treatment and care.

Ashokan inscriptions provide the most reliable evidence regarding institutionalized healthcare. Major Rock Edict II explicitly mentions arrangements for medical treatment for both humans and animals throughout the empire. This suggests that healthcare facilities were not isolated or privately managed, but were instead integrated into the administrative framework of the Mauryan state. The reference to the availability of medical treatment in both urban and rural areas implies a decentralized network of medical institutions under state supervision.

Medical practitioners during this period were likely trained in the traditional systems of medicine prevalent in ancient India. Texts such as the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita, though not directly attributed to Ashoka’s reign, represent the medical knowledge and surgical practices that informed healthcare delivery during the Mauryan era. These texts indicate the presence of organized medical education, specialized physicians, and systematic treatment methods, which would have supported the functioning of medical institutions.

In addition to curative care, Mauryan medical institutions emphasized preventive and supportive healthcare. The cultivation and distribution of medicinal plants, herbs, and roots – mentioned in Ashokan edicts – suggest that medical centers had access to essential pharmaceutical resources. Facilities such as rest houses and water reservoirs, constructed along major routes, also served a health-related function by providing shelter, clean water, and relief to travelers, monks, and the general population.

Another distinctive feature of Ashoka’s healthcare policy was the establishment of veterinary medical institutions. The provision of animal hospitals highlights the inclusive and ethical character of Mauryan healthcare administration and reflects the influence of Ashoka’s Dhamma, which promoted compassion toward all living beings.

Overall, hospitals and medical institutions under King Ashoka represent an early and organized attempt at institutional healthcare. These establishments functioned not merely as treatment centers but as integral components of a broader public health system, demonstrating the Mauryan state’s commitment to welfare-oriented governance.

Animal health care and veterinary services constituted a significant and innovative aspect of public welfare administration during the reign of King Ashoka. In the broader framework of Mauryan governance, animal welfare was not treated as a secondary concern but was integrated into the state’s ethical, economic, and administrative priorities. Influenced by the principles of Dhamma, Ashoka’s policies extended compassion and protection beyond human society to encompass animals, reflecting an advanced moral vision for his time.



Archaeological evidence, particularly the Ashokan rock and pillar edicts, provides clear indications of organized veterinary care under Ashoka's rule. Several inscriptions explicitly mention arrangements for medical treatment for animals alongside provisions for human healthcare. These references suggest the existence of designated facilities or institutional arrangements where animals received treatment. Moreover, the imperial policy of planting and distributing medicinal herbs throughout the empire – both indigenous and imported – points to a structured system that supported veterinary medicine as well as human healthcare.

Animal healthcare under Ashoka served multiple purposes. Ethically, it was rooted in the Buddhist ideals of ahimsa (non-violence) and compassion toward all living beings. The regulation of animal slaughter, protection of certain species, and discouragement of cruelty reflect the moral dimensions of healthcare governance. Such measures contributed to a social environment that valued care, restraint, and respect for life, which indirectly supported public health and social harmony.

From an administrative and economic perspective, veterinary services were essential for maintaining agricultural productivity and transportation networks. Animals such as cattle, horses, and elephants played a vital role in farming, trade, communication, and military operations. Ensuring their health was therefore crucial to the stability and efficiency of the Mauryan state. The provision of veterinary care can thus be understood as a strategic policy that balanced ethical considerations with practical governance needs.

Literary sources further support the presence of veterinary knowledge and practices in ancient India. Ayurvedic traditions, including early references in texts such as the Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita, acknowledge the treatment of animal diseases and the use of herbal remedies. Buddhist literature also reflects Ashoka's concern for animal welfare, reinforcing the interpretation that veterinary care was both a moral and administrative responsibility of the state.

Overall, animal health care and veterinary services under King Ashoka represent one of the earliest examples of state-supported veterinary administration in world history. By institutionalizing animal care within the broader framework of public welfare, Ashoka demonstrated a holistic approach to governance that linked ethical values, economic sustainability, and public health. This model highlights the interconnectedness of human and animal well-being and underscores the progressive nature of healthcare policies during the Mauryan period.

The concept of **Dhamma** played a central role in shaping the public health and healthcare policies during the reign of King Ashoka. Following the Kalinga War, Ashoka adopted Dhamma as a guiding principle of governance, emphasizing moral responsibility, compassion, non-violence, and concern for the welfare of all living beings. These ethical values were not confined to personal conduct but were systematically incorporated into state policies, including healthcare administration.

Healthcare under Ashoka was deeply influenced by the humanitarian ethos of Dhamma. The emphasis on kindness and empathy translated into concrete measures such as the provision of medical treatment for the sick, care for the vulnerable, and the extension of healthcare services to both humans and animals. Ashokan inscriptions reflect this moral orientation by highlighting welfare activities as essential duties of the ruler rather



than acts of charity. In this framework, healthcare emerged as a moral obligation of the state, rooted in ethical governance.

The policy of Dhamma also promoted preventive healthcare by encouraging socially responsible behavior. Ashoka advocated moderation, non-violence, and respect for life, which indirectly contributed to healthier social practices. Regulations on animal slaughter, protection of certain species, and concern for environmental well-being supported a balanced and sustainable approach to public health. These measures reveal an early understanding of the interconnectedness between ethical conduct, environmental stability, and physical health.

Administrative mechanisms further reinforced the role of Dhamma in healthcare policies. Officials appointed to propagate Dhamma were also involved in supervising welfare activities, ensuring that moral principles were effectively implemented at the local level. This integration of ethics and administration strengthened the delivery and accessibility of healthcare services across the Mauryan Empire.

Overall, Dhamma functioned as the ideological foundation of Ashoka's healthcare policies. By embedding moral values into public administration, Ashoka transformed healthcare into a humane, inclusive, and state-supported system. This ethical approach not only enhanced the effectiveness of healthcare governance but also contributed to the historical development of welfare-oriented public health systems in ancient India

The analysis of public health and healthcare administration during the reign of King Ashoka reveals a remarkably advanced and organized system of welfare governance for an ancient empire. The evidence drawn from archaeological inscriptions and literary sources indicates that healthcare was not treated as a peripheral or voluntary activity, but as an essential responsibility of the state. This approach represents a significant departure from earlier forms of governance that largely confined medical care to private practitioners or religious institutions.

Ashoka's healthcare policies demonstrate a conscious integration of ethical principles with administrative practice. The policy of Dhamma functioned as a moral framework that reshaped state priorities, placing compassion, non-violence, and public welfare at the center of governance. Healthcare initiatives such as the establishment of medical institutions, provision of treatment for humans and animals, and promotion of medicinal resources illustrate how ethical values were translated into practical administrative measures. This fusion of morality and governance distinguishes Ashokan healthcare administration from purely utilitarian systems.

From an administrative perspective, the Mauryan healthcare system reflects elements of decentralization and accessibility. The widespread distribution of medical facilities, wells, and rest houses across urban and rural areas suggests an intention to ensure equitable access to healthcare services. The involvement of state officials in supervising welfare activities indicates the presence of an organized bureaucratic mechanism to implement health-related policies. Such administrative coordination points toward an early model of public health management.



Preventive healthcare emerges as a notable strength of Ashoka's policies. Environmental measures, sanitation-related infrastructure, and regulation of animal welfare contributed indirectly to disease prevention and public well-being. The emphasis on animal healthcare further highlights an advanced understanding of the interdependence between human health, livestock, and the environment – an idea that resonates with modern concepts of holistic and sustainable healthcare.

However, the limitations of available evidence must also be acknowledged. Much of the information regarding healthcare institutions is derived from inscriptions that emphasize royal intent rather than operational details. Literary sources, while valuable, often reflect religious or normative perspectives, which may idealize Ashoka's policies. Despite these constraints, the convergence of multiple sources strengthens the credibility of the overall picture.

Overall, the healthcare administration under King Ashoka can be viewed as one of the earliest examples of state-sponsored public health systems. Its emphasis on ethical governance, institutional care, and preventive measures marks a significant contribution to the historical evolution of healthcare administration in India.

Conclusion

The examination of public health and healthcare administration under King Ashoka reveals a remarkably advanced and ethically grounded system of welfare governance in ancient India. Ashoka's reign represents a critical moment in history when healthcare was consciously incorporated into state policy rather than remaining confined to individual practitioners or religious institutions. His approach reflects an early understanding that the health of the population was directly linked to social stability, moral order, and effective administration.

One of the most significant contributions of Ashoka was the integration of Dhamma into healthcare policies. By promoting compassion, non-violence, and responsibility toward all living beings, Ashoka established a moral foundation for public health initiatives. Healthcare under his rule was not limited to curing diseases but extended to preventive care, mental well-being, ethical conduct, and environmental considerations. This holistic vision distinguishes Ashoka's model from purely curative medical systems and aligns closely with modern concepts of comprehensive public health.

Archaeological evidence, particularly the Ashokan edicts, confirms the existence of organized healthcare measures, including the distribution of medicinal herbs, establishment of medical facilities, and appointment of officials responsible for public welfare. These initiatives demonstrate that healthcare was supported by administrative mechanisms and state resources. The inclusion of veterinary services further emphasizes the comprehensive nature of Ashoka's policies, highlighting the importance of animal health for both ethical and economic reasons.

Literary sources such as Buddhist texts, Ayurvedic traditions, and administrative treatises complement archaeological findings by illustrating the broader intellectual and cultural context of healthcare during the Mauryan period. Together, these sources suggest that Ashoka did not merely endorse existing medical

practices but actively facilitated their expansion and accessibility. His policies contributed to the diffusion of medical knowledge and services across a vast and diverse empire.

From a contemporary perspective, Ashoka's healthcare administration offers valuable lessons for modern public health systems. His emphasis on state responsibility, ethical governance, preventive measures, and equitable access remains highly relevant in addressing present-day healthcare challenges. The integration of moral values with administrative efficiency under Ashoka underscores the potential of governance models that prioritize human welfare over purely economic or political considerations.

In conclusion, the healthcare policies of King Ashoka represent one of the earliest and most comprehensive examples of state-supported public health administration in world history. By combining ethical principles with practical governance, Ashoka laid the foundation for a welfare-oriented state that recognized health as a collective social responsibility. The study of his policies not only enhances our understanding of ancient healthcare systems but also provides enduring insights into the role of ethical leadership in shaping effective and humane public health frameworks.

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