

ON THE MEANING OF THE NAMES *AŚOKA* AND *PIYADASI*

There was a time in the history of Indian studies when some scholars were inclined to believe that the names *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* had belonged to two different men: *Aśoka* (*Asoka*) was a king of Magadha from the Maurya dynasty, mentioned in some Buddhist and Hindu literary sources, while *Piyadasi* was the king whose famous inscriptions, or edicts, were discovered one by one in the first decades of the 19th century in different parts of India. The identity of the two kings was established in 1837, when the academic world became acquainted with the text of the Buddhist chronicle *Dīpavamśa*<sup>1</sup>. In this Pāli text the names *Asoka* (or *Asokadhamma*, *Dhammāsoka*) and *Piyadasi* (or *Piyadassana*) refer to the same king, renowned for his support of the Buddhist faith (cf. *Dīpavamśa* VI. 1, 2, 12-15, 18, 23-24; VII. 14-16, 18; XV. 88; XVI. 5; *Dīpavamśa* 1879: 146-193)<sup>2</sup>. At a somewhat later period scholars

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<sup>1</sup> J. PRINCEP, "Further Elucidations of the *lāt* or *Sīlastambha* Inscriptions from Various Sources", in *JRAS* 6 (1837), pp. 790-794; G. TURNOUR, "Further Notes on the Inscriptions on the Columns at Delhi, Allahabad, Betiah, etc.", in *JRAS* 6 (1837), pp. 1049-1064.

<sup>2</sup> Several decades later the identity of *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* was supported by additional evidence: the memorial columns in Lumbini and Nigliwa had been erected, according to the accounts of Chinese pilgrims Fa Hsian and Hsiung Tsiang, by emperor *Aśoka*, but archaeologists discovered on them inscriptions which attributed their erection to king *Piyadasi*: V. SMITH, "The Identity of

were able to link the epigraphic and the literary evidence with certain historical dates (known from the Greek sources), namely those of Alexander the Great's Indian campaign and of *Aśoka's* grandfather, Chandragupta's ascent to throne. Thus, a corner-stone has been laid upon which the entire structure of Ancient Indian history and chronology was to be set up.

More than a century and a half has passed since *Aśoka's* identity with *Piyadasi* was established, yet we cannot claim that we know either the exact meanings of the names or the nature of their interrelationship. The present article is an attempt to answer these questions after a review of the earlier attempts to explain the meanings of the names, made by some ancient authors as well as by modern scholars.

As regards the name *Aśoka* (*Asoka*) there are various interpretations of its meaning in the Buddhist literary sources, yet most interpretations lack reliability and are often contradictory. According to one of the versions, *Aśoka* (*Aśoka*) was the king's nickname, meaning "one-who-has-no-sorrow (for people)", "one-who-has-no-mercy", "merciless"; he is said to have been given the nickname because in his younger days he had done plenty of cruel acts in the struggle with his relatives for the throne of Magadha<sup>3</sup>. But the most reliable historical sources, his inscriptions, do not mention *Aśoka's* struggle for power. Also, there is evidence that the king himself considered the name *Aśoka* to be his personal name and not a nickname with a derogatory meaning. Moreover there are grounds to believe that the cruelty of the young emperor was grossly exaggerated by the Buddhists: in their legends they made use of various means to emphasize the contrast between the cruelty of the king before his conversion to Buddhism and his kindness afterwards<sup>4</sup>.

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Piyadasi (Priyadarsin) with *Aśoka* Maurya and Some Connected Problems", in *JRAS*, 1901, p. 830.

<sup>3</sup> G.R. MALALASEKERA (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism*, Vol. II, fasc. 2. Ceylon, 1967, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. S. MUKHOPADHYAYA (ed.), *The Aśokāvadāna*, New Delhi, 1963, p. 14.

Some modern scholars tend to give the name an alternative interpretation: *Aśoka*, according to them, stands for “One-who-knows-no-sorrow”, i.e., “One-who-is-calm” or “tranquil”, “One-who-achieved-tranquillity”, and thus has a positive meaning. They suggest that it was an official, “throne” name of the Emperor, which had a Buddhist meaning, i.e., the meaning related to the fundamental principles of Buddhism<sup>5</sup>. This explanation is not convincing for merely one reason: if it was indeed a royal, “throne” name and a Buddhist one, why, then, did the Emperor almost never (with only a few exceptions) use it in his official royal edicts or in his inscriptions addressed to the Buddhist *saṅgha*?

In several Buddhist legends the name *Aśoka* is interpreted to mean “having (or: bringing)-no-sorrows”: from the moment the child was born his mother considered herself to be “sorrowless” or “free from sorrow”, because the birth of a son considerably strengthened her position at court<sup>6</sup>. According to another version (in a commentary to the *Mahāvanisa - Vanisatthappakāsinī* 6. 125), the child was named *Aśoka* as “bringing-no-sorrow” to his mother, because her labour had been painless.

Most interpretations of the name *Aśoka* in the Buddhist sources should be approached with caution; they are merely instances of the so-called “etymological reinterpretation” - when at first an author finds a fictitious etymology for a certain name, which serves him as a pretext to invent a story about the name’s bearer that would fit in well with his character. Such an “etymological reinterpretation” was an element of poetry or an element of narrative technique, and neither the writer nor his readers would consider it literally or historically true. This may explain why, in one and the same Buddhist text (e.g., in the *Aśokāvadāna*) different and even contradictory “explanations” of the name *Aśoka* are found side by

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<sup>5</sup> M.C. JOSHI, J.C. JOSHI, “A Study in the Names of *Aśoka*”, in *JOIB* 17, 4 (1968), p. 420.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36; cf. J. PRZYLUKSI, La légende de l’empereur *Açoka* (*Açokāvadāna*) dans les textes indiens et chinois. Paris, 1923, p. 320.

side. The readers would never regard it as odd or unnatural, because they were obviously quite familiar with this poetic convention.

However, among Buddhist legends about the great Emperor there are a few which probably reflect historical truth as far as the meaning of the name is concerned. In these legends the name *Aśoka* is perceived as a “tree-name”, i.e., the name given to a person after a particular tree; in our case it is the *aśoka*-tree (*Saraca Indica*). There is a story, in the *Aśokāvadāna*, about the cruel young *Aśoka* who ordered to execute some maids at his court because they had picked the flowers and had broken the branches of the *aśoka*-tree growing in the palace garden. The king felt insulted because the tree was “of one name” with him (*sahānāma*). There is a similar story in the *Aśokāvadāna* and in the earlier *Sūtrālaṅkāra* by Aśvaghōṣa: in it, the old Emperor, deprived of all his riches and of his royal power by the greedy relatives, likens himself, in his lamentation, to a cut-down *aśoka*-tree, devoid of leaves and flowers.

But was it possible for a prince and a member of the Magadhan royal family to be named after a tree? Such a possibility does not seem unlikely - in view, e.g., of the fact that in some Buddhist biographies of *Aśoka* an important role is ascribed to his young nephew, *Nigrodha* (Sanskrit *Nyagrodha*, i.e. *vaṭa*, or the famous Indian banyan-tree, *Ficus Indica*). Thus, according to this legend, tree-names were not uncommon in the Maurya royal family. True, the name *Nigrodha* could have been invented by the Buddhists following the pattern of the name *Aśoka*, but in this case it can be assumed that the Buddhists evidently perceived the name *Aśoka* as a tree-name.

Outside the Buddhist tradition, in a Hindu, Purāṇic text additional evidence is found to indicate that the meaning of the Emperor's name was somehow connected with the *aśoka*-tree: the name of the Magadhan king is used in it in the form *Aśokavardhana* which can be understood in two ways: “One-who-increases-sorrowlessness-(of his subjects)”<sup>7</sup> or “One-who-plants-the-*aśoka*-trees”. Planting of trees, especially of sacred ones, is known to have

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<sup>7</sup> M.C. JOSHI, J.C. JOSHI, *op. cit.*, p. 420.



been a duty of a king in Ancient India. Tree-worship was particularly popular in East India under the first Mauryas (*Aśoka*'s predecessors), the only notable difference between them and *Aśoka* being that, as a devout Buddhist, he had a special reverence for the *bodhi*-tree (*aśvattha*, *pippal*)<sup>8</sup>. *Aśoka* was clearly not an ordinary tree, but a sacred one, which played an important role both in myth and in ritual. Special importance is ascribed to the *aśoka*-tree in the Jaina religion; the central position of *Aśoka* in Jainism<sup>9</sup> may be compared to that of the *bodhi* tree in Buddhism. We must also bear in mind that, according to the Jaina sources, some Maurya emperors, beginning with *Aśoka*'s grandfather, the great Chandragupta, were ardent followers of the Jaina religion<sup>10</sup>. It seems possible that in the early Buddhism too, the *aśoka*-tree could have played a significant role - in any case, modern Hinayāna Buddhists in Burma worship *Aśoka* as the tree under which the Buddha was born and, at a later time, preached his first sermon<sup>11</sup>. But particularly important was the role played by the *aśoka*-tree in the Ancient Indian folk tradition, namely, in the specific rites performed by young maidens, which will be discussed below.

Let us now turn to the Emperor's other name: *Piyadasi*. To the best of my knowledge, ancient authors never explained its meaning: it was, from their point of view, self-evident and did not require an explanation. But as far as modern scholars are concerned, there are two opposite ways to understand the meaning of *Piyadasi*. A majority of scholars interpret and translate the name as "One-who-looks-with-kindness-(upon his subjects)" or "One-who-looks-with-friendliness-(at all people)", "One-who-looks-with-compassion-(at everybody)", or, even, "Humane"<sup>12</sup>. All these scholars believe that

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<sup>8</sup> B.C. SINHA, *Tree Worship in Ancient India*, New Delhi, 1979, pp. 50-51, 57.

<sup>9</sup> According to a Jaina legend, Mahāvīra renounced the world while sitting under an *aśoka*-tree, and wherever he preached later, trees of this species would appear: V. STEVENSON, *Heart of Jainism*, Oxford, 1915, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> G.M. BONGARD-LEVIN, G.F. ILYIN, *Ancient India*, Moscow, (in Russian) 1969, p. 456.

<sup>11</sup> B.C. SINHA, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>12</sup> V. SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 855; J.F. FLEET, "The Rummindei Inscription and the Conversion of *Aśoka* to Buddhism", in *JRAS*, 1908, 1st half, p. 483; R.K.

the last element (-*darśin*) in the name *Priyadarśin* has an active meaning (“one who looks at”, “looking upon”). This interpretation of the name (especially in the form “One-who-looks-with-kindness-upon-his-subjects”) fits in well with the Buddhist outlook of *Aśoka* in his mature years, after his conversion and after the Kalinga war. But the inscription found in Taxila was made on behalf of the young prince *Priyadarśin*, and it testifies to the fact that he had borne the name long before his conversion to Buddhism and even before he became a king<sup>13</sup>. It would be worth noticing that the Greek and the Aramaic inscriptions of *Aśoka* do not translate this name but only attempt to reproduce it phonetically (*Piodāsses*, *Prydrś*); therefore one comes to the conclusion that the name was understood at the time not as an epithet having some special significance in the context of *Dharma*-preaching, but merely as a personal name. Here another problem arises as well - that of the appropriateness of a name with such a meaning in particular historical circumstances. It is known that *Aśoka-Piyadasi* was a member of the royal dynasty that practised very active policy of military conquests, launched merciless wars, exterminated local ruling elites, etc. Was it appropriate for a son of such a warlike family to receive, at the moment of his birth, the name meaning “One-who-looks-at-all-people-with-compassion” or suchlike? It seems to me highly improbable. This is why we must pay particular attention to the alternative interpretation of the name *Piyadasi* (*Priyadarśin*).

Some scholars, though very few in number, translate the name *Piyadasi* (*Priyadarśin*) as “Pleasant-to-look-upon”; “Pleasant-to-behold” or “Pleasant-to-the-eyes”<sup>14</sup>. They believe that the last

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MOOKERJEE, *Aśoka*, Delhi, 1953, pp. 11-12; U. SCERRATO, “Introduction”, in: PUGLIESE CARATELLI G., GARBINI G. A. *Bilingual Graeco-Aramaic Edict by Aśoka*, Roma, 1964, pp. 5, 35; G.R. MALALASEKERA, *op. cit.*, p. 180; S. BHATTACHARYA, *A Dictionary of Indian History*, New York, 1967, p. 67; M.C. JOSHI, J.C. JOSHI, *op. cit.*, pp. 419-420.

<sup>13</sup> G.M. BONGARD-LEVIN, “*Aśoka*’s Inscription from Taxila”, in *Sovetskoye vostokovedeniye*, 1 (1956) (in Russian), pp. 121-128.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g. B. WALKER, *Hindu World*, Vol. I, New York, 1968, p. 82: “Pleasant to behold”. Once there was an attempt to combine both basic meanings in one

element (*-darśin*) in the compound name has a passive meaning: “seen”, “looked upon” etc. Indeed, *-darśin* at the end of compounds can have, in Sanskrit, either an active, or a passive meaning. But in case of *Priyadarśin* the passive meaning for *-darśin* is more likely. It would be useful to recall here that in the Buddhist literary sources, alongside with the form *Piyadas(s)i* (= *Priyadarśin*), two other forms of the name are used: *Piyadassana* (= *Priyadarśana*)<sup>15</sup> and *Piyadasa*, *Piyadassa* (= *Priyadarśa*)<sup>16</sup>. The former, *piyadassana*, as a noun, in most cases has a passive meaning, while the latter, *piyadas(s)a*, has only one, passive meaning (“pleasant to be seen” etc.). But the fact remains that all the three forms - *piyadas(s)i*, *piyadassana* and *piyadas(s)a* - are synonymous (otherwise how could they have been used as the names of the same king?). Thus, it would only be logical to interpret the name *Piyadasi* in the passive sense (as “pleasant to behold”, “beautiful” etc.).

Now let us turn to the other problem: in what way are the two names of the Emperor, *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi*, interrelated? Most scholars are inclined to think that they differ chronologically, i.e., that they were used in different periods of the Emperor’s life. Many historians, for example, consider the name *Aśoka* to be a personal name of the king, the name which he received at birth, while *Piyadasi* was, in their opinion, his Buddhist name<sup>17</sup> or his “royal”, “throne” name which was given to him at the ceremony of his coronation<sup>18</sup>. And there is, of course, an entirely opposite point of view, represented in the 1930-s by S. Mitra and, in 1960-s, by G.M. Bongard-Levin. These scholars believe that the personal name of the

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translation: “the king of auspicious countenance”: J. CHARPENTIER, “Remarks on the fourth Rock Edict of *Aśoka*”, in *IHQ* 9, 1, (March, 1933), pp. 86-87.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g. *The Dīpavamsa*, ed. and transl. by H. OLDENBERG, London-Edinburgh, 1879, pp. 146-193; V. SMITH, *op. cit.*, pp. 828-829).

<sup>16</sup> So in *Sumaṅgalavilāsīnī* by Buddhaghōṣa and *Rasavahinī*; see G. TURNOUR, *op. cit.*, p. 1056; S. MITRA, “Identity of *Piyadasi* and *Aśoka*”, in *Indian Culture* 1, 1, (July, 1934), pp. 120-121.

<sup>17</sup> V. SMITH, *op. cit.*, p. 885; B. M. BARUA, *Aśoka and his Inscriptions*, Calcutta, 1955, pp. 17-18; D.C. SIRCAR, *Inscriptions of Aśoka*, Delhi, 1957, p. 12

<sup>18</sup> A. SEN, *Aśoka’s Edicts*, Calcutta, 1956, pp. 12-13; R. THAPAR, *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, London, 1961, p. 27; U. SCERRATO, *op. cit.*, p. 35).

prince was *Piyadasi*, while *Aśoka* was his “royal”, or “coronation”, name with a Buddhist meaning. Both scholars refer to the passage from a work by Buddhaghōṣa, which runs: «the prince named *Piyadasi*, having established his royal umbrella, became Dharmarājā *Aśoka*»<sup>19</sup>. But the evidence cannot be accepted, since the Emperor almost never or very seldom, as has already been mentioned, used this supposedly “royal”, or “official” name in his official inscriptions. The passage from Buddhaghōṣa can prove only one thing, namely, that in the Buddhist tradition of the 5th century A.D. (eight hundred years following the events) the image of the legendary Dharmarājā was predominantly associated with the name *Aśoka*.

Of a much greater historical importance to us is the evidence of *Aśoka*'s own inscriptions. How did the Emperor name himself - or, how was he named - in these official documents?

In the overwhelming majority of the inscriptions a standard anthroponimic formula is used:

*devānampiya Piyadasi rājā*

“dear to the gods king *Piyadasi*” - (137 cases)<sup>20</sup>

Sometimes the formula is used in a reduced, elliptic form:

*devānam piya*

- (20 cases)

*rājā Piyadasi*

- (4 cases)

<sup>19</sup> S. MITRA, *op. cit.*; M.C. JOSHI, J.C. JOSHI, *op. cit.*, pp. 416, 419-421; G.M. BONGARD-LEVIN, G.F. ILYIN, *Ancient India*, p. 248; cf. G. TURNOUR, *op. cit.*, p. 1056.

<sup>20</sup> According to M.C. Joshi, J. C. Joshi, *op. cit.*, p. 418, I regard *devānampiya* “dear to the gods” not as a name, but as a title, which was applied to kings before and after *Aśoka*: V. SMITH, “The Authorship of the *Piyadasi* Inscriptions”, in *JRAS*, 1908 (1st half), pp. 504-505. At a later time the word acquired the meaning “fool”, which puzzled many Indologists (see, e.g., B. PRAKASH, “Historical Study of the Sanskrit Word *Devānāmpriya*”, in *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal*, 8, pt. 1-2, (March-Sept. 1970), pp. 160-171); probably, one has to take into account a possibility, in this case, of the universally spread semantic shift: “chosen by the gods” - “(holy) madman” - “fool”.

As regards the name *Aśoka*, it appears in the inscriptions only a few times. In one instance it evidently substitutes the name *Piyadasi* in the standard anthroponimic formula:

*devā namī piya Asoka*

(Maski, MRE I).

For years it had remained a single instance of this kind, until, about 20 years ago, a version of Minor Rock Edict I (MRE I) was discovered in Nittur (Karnataka), containing the name *Asoka* (though not in the first, but in the last sentence). A version of the MRE II was also found in Nittur, containing the name *Aśoka* in the first sentence, in the way similar with the Maski version of MRE I. Once more this name (in combination: *rājā Aśoko devānamīpiya*) appears in another version of MRI from Udegoḷam<sup>21</sup>.

But there is only one inscription in which both names - *Asoka* and *Piyadasi* - stand side by side: the version of MRE I from Gujarrā:

*devānamīpiya Piyadasi Asoka rājā*

It must be emphasized that all the inscriptions containing the name *Asoka* are versions of Minor Rock Edicts I and II which should be regarded as the Emperor's earliest edicts<sup>22</sup>. These inscriptions witness with all certainty that there are no grounds whatsoever to attribute the names *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* to different periods in the Emperor's life: according to the data of Minor Rock Edicts I and II these names were used simultaneously. This evidence also rules out the possibility that *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* were "parallel" names, i.e., names, used in different spheres of life (as, for example,

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<sup>21</sup> D.C. SIRCAR, "Recently discovered Minor Rock Edicts of Aśoka", in JAIH, Calcutta, 9, 1977-1978 (1979), pp. 6-12; D.C. SIRCAR, "Synoptical Texts of Minor Rock Edicts I and II of Aśoka", in JAIH, Calcutta, 12, 1978-1979 (1980). I am grateful to Professor Bratindra Nath Mukherjee for his helpful suggestion to take into account these works by the late Prof. D.C.Sircar.

<sup>22</sup> B.N. MUKHERJEE, *Studies in the Aramaic Edicts of Aśoka*, Calcutta, 1984, p. 54.

in modern life - the personal name of an author and his/her pen name, or, as in our case, the personal name and the royal, or Buddhist, religious name): the earliest edicts of *Aśoka* witness that not only the name *Piyadasi*, but also the name *Asoka* was used (though very seldom) in official royal inscriptions. Thus, we can conclude that neither of the popular explanations of the interrelation between the names *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* (as belonging to different periods of time, or as belonging to different spheres of the Emperor's life) is convincing. The interrelation between the names should be explained in some other way.

There is a peculiarity in the usage of the two names which gains special importance in this respect. The names *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* are almost never used together, in one formula. This is relevant for the literary (Hindu and Buddhist) sources and for the inscriptions as such. The Gujarrā inscription (*devānamīpiya Piyadasi Asoka rājā*) seems to be the only exception from the general rule; the rule being that each time only one name is used: either *Aśoka*, or *Piyadasi*. This peculiarity did not escape the attention of the eminent historian Vincent Smith who defined, in one of his articles, the names *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* as convertible names<sup>23</sup>. It was only a guess, made in passing, yet a lucky one, which merits further exploration. The aim of the present article is to show that *Aśoka* and *Piyadasi* are, indeed, convertible names, and, also, to explain the nature of their convertibility.

It may seem strange to refer to Sanskrit Epic poetry for evidence to elucidate the meanings of the names in the inscriptions of the Maurya period<sup>24</sup>, but the key-verse to support my arguments is

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<sup>23</sup> V. SMITH, "The Identity of Piyadasi (Priyadarśin) with Aśoka Maurya and Some Connected Problems",... p. 829.

<sup>24</sup> It could be argued that it is practically impossible to ascribe with any certainty any passage of the Indian Epic to any particular historical epoch. How, then, can we use epic verses for the reconstruction of linguistic and cultural phenomena of the Maurya period? The answer is: the only way to date an epic passage is to differentiate between the later style of written literature - and the free, formulaic, but at the same time widely variative style of oral epic poetry. The verses that I use in support of my point of view are full of formulas which are still elastic and variative, in contrast to some petrified clichés of the late parts of the Epic.

contained, as it seems, in the well-known *Nalopākhyāna* (story of Nāla and Damayantī) from the third book of the *Mahābhārata*, *Āraṇyakaparvan*. Abandoned by her husband, suffering from separation, Damayantī sights an *aśoka*-tree, standing amidst the forest and addresses it, asking the tree to let her see her husband. Her address contains the following words:

*viśokām kuru mām kṣipram aśoka priyadarśana*

(Mbh III. 61. 99)

which literally means: "Quickly make me the one-without-sorrow, oh *aśoka*, pleasant-to-look-upon..."

The *Nalopākhyāna* is extensively used (at least, in Europe) for training students in Sanskrit. There is no doubt that hundreds of scholars and students, upon reading this verse, wondered if it could be a pure chance that the tree-name, identical with the name of the Magadhan emperor, is defined here by the adjective which is identical to the other name of the same person? Indeed, the epithet *priyadarśana* can be applied in the *Mahābhārata* to different objects and personages (e.g., to Bhīmasena - III.157. 47; 176.15; to warriors from Udra and Pāṇḍya countries - VIII. 8.15; to king Duryodhana - III. 231. 11; VIII. 25. 4<sup>25</sup>).

Yet I think it would be preposterous to agree with this common opinion and to regard the combination of words *aśoka priyadarśana* in Mbh III. 61. 99 as a pure coincidence. There are several relevant passages in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* that convince me

Therefore we may assume that they belong to the earlier stratum of stylistic means in the Epic, which constituted the heritage of the oral epic tradition. There can be no doubt that the Sanskrit epic tradition existed in the Maurya period in its oral form. Numerous correspondences between the Sanskrit epic verses and the Buddhist *gāthās* convince us that both traditions used some common treasury of poetic formulas and imagery.

<sup>25</sup> In these last examples *priyadarśana* is probably to be understood as a constant epithet applied to a king, which had been substantivated and turned to a royal title. This could explain the fact that in Viśākhadatta's play *Mudrārākṣasa* this title is once applied to the Aśoka's grandfather, Chandragupta (R. THAPAR, *op. cit.*, p. 226).

that *priyadarśana* was not merely one among many adjectives which was applied to the noun *aśoka* only once and more or less incidentally, but that *priyadarśana* was a constant epithet for the noun *aśoka* in the language of Sanskrit Epic poetry.

The same episode of Damayantī's address to the *aśoka* tree contains the following verse:

*yathā viśokā gaccheyam aśokanaga tat kuru /  
satyanāmā bhavā 'soka mama śokavināśanat //*

(Mbh III. 61. 102)

“Oh *aśoka*-tree, make so that I may become the one-without-sorrow; be true to your name, oh *aśoka*, by way of destroying my sorrow”.

Here the second line deserves special attention. Damayantī asks the *aśoka* tree to be true to its name by way of destroying her sorrow (*śokavināśanat*). But the pun, or the wordplay, is not as simple as it seems. The pun in this *śloka* is double. On the one hand, Damayantī asks the tree to be true to its name (*aśoka*) by way of making her a “one-without-sorrow” (*viśokā*). But on the other, she asks the tree to make true its other name, or, to be precise, by way of removing sorrow (*śokavināśanāt*) to make true its constant epithet *śokanāśana*. The instances when *śokanāśana* serves as a constant epithet for the *aśoka*-tree can be found not only in the *Mahābhārata*, but also in another great Sanskrit epic poem, *Rāmāyaṇa* (e.g., Rām. V. 15. 7: *aśokaiḥ bokaṇāśanaiḥ*).

Now let us compare the verse Mbh. III.61.102 with a verse from the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The latter verse is used in the following episode: Rāma, in his search for Sītā, sees an *aśoka*-tree standing in the middle of the forest and asks it to let him see his beloved again:

*aśoka śokāpanuda śokopahatacetanam /  
tvam nāmānamī kuru kṣipramī priyāsamarśanena mām //*

(Rām. III. 60. 17)



“Oh *aśoka*-tree, the one-who-drives-sorrows-away, quickly make me, whose-mind-is-afflicted-with-sorrow, (like) your name - by way of seeing-my-beloved (or: by way of making-me-see-my-beloved)”.

There can be no doubt that the second line of this verse follows the same pattern as the second line of the previously cited verse Mbh. III. 61. 102 (the similarity is even more complete if we take into account the variant of the verse Rām. III.60.17, found in the Southern Recension of the *Mahābhārata*; see Critical edition, *Āraṇyakaparvan*, \*280: *tvaṃ nāmānaṃ kuru kṣipraṃ priyāsamidarśanād dhi māṃ*). The obvious analogy between Mbh. III.61.102 and Rām. III.60.17 gives us grounds to believe that in the case of the *Rāmāyaṇa* verse there is, again, a double pun: not only does Rāma ask the *aśoka*-tree to make him “resemble its name” - i.e., to make him *a-śoka* or *vi-śoka* “the-one-without-sorrow”, but at the same time he implies that *aśoka*-tree must actualize its other name: *priyadarśana* by letting him see his beloved (*priyāsamidarśanena*, *priyāsamidarśanat*), or, perhaps, even by making him a *priyādarśana* in the sense of the *bahuvrīhī* compound: the one-who-sees-his-beloved (or: the one-who-had-*darśana*-of his-beloved).

In the article published in Russian several years ago I came to the conclusion, on the basis of only these three epic *ślokas*, that the word *priyadarśana* in the language of the Sanskrit Epic poetry most probably served as a constant epithet for the noun *aśoka*, i.e., that the epithet *priyadarśana* was regularly and repeatedly used in reference to this tree. All my attempts to find some additional textual material failed. It was evident that the usage of the formulas referring to *aśoka priyadarśana* is limited to a particular conventional literary situation: a lover, separated from his/her partner, addresses an *aśoka*-tree, asking it to make him/her see the beloved again. I expressed hope at the time that some other scholars would probably find the descriptions of a similar situation outside the Epic, in some other genres of Sanskrit (or Pali, Prakrit)

literature. As regards the Sanskrit Epic, I was sure that there were no more relevant contexts<sup>26</sup>. Now I must admit that I was mistaken.

During my stay in Calcutta as a visiting fellow of the Asiatic Society in the spring-summer 1995 I had an opportunity to use a rare Indian edition that Russian libraries do not possess - the *pāda*-index to the *Mahābhārata*<sup>27</sup> in which one can find any epic *śloka* and any particular formula contained not only in the Critical text, but also in all the manuscript versions that the compilers of the Critical edition used. With the help of this index it was very easy to find, in one of the Appendices to the Critical edition, a passage where the same formulaic *śloka* as in Rām. III. 60. 17, was used in the *Mahābhārata* in an extremely interesting context. The passage, as it seems, removes all the remaining doubts and provides answers to two very important questions: why was the *asōka*-tree called *priyadarśana*, and, why in all the passages cited do lovers, separated from objects of their love, address this particular tree and ask it to let them see the beloved again?

In the first book of the *Mahābhārata*, *Ādiparvan*, a story is told (Mbh. I.77) about Yayāti, the king who married a beautiful Brahman girl, daughter of ṛṣi Śukra, Devayānī. Yayāti took Devayānī from the forest hermitage of her father to his capital. She was followed by her many maid-servants; among them there was Śarmiṣṭhā, daughter of the Asura king Vṛṣaparvan. Many years earlier Śarmiṣṭhā had gravely insulted Devayānī and her father, the great ṛṣi Śukra; in punishment for it she was ordered by her own father to wait upon Devayānī as a maid-servant and to follow her to the house of her would-be husband. So, Yayāti took both Devayānī and Śarmiṣṭhā to his capital; he installed Devayānī, as the queen, in his *antaḥpuram*, the inner, ladies' chamber of his palace; while Śarmiṣṭhā was established in a small mansion, especially built for this purpose in

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<sup>26</sup> Ya.V. VASSILKOV, "On the meaning of the names: Aśoka, Piyadasi", in *Literatura i kul'tura drevney i srednevekovoy Indii*, Moscow (in Russian), 1987, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> *The Pratika-Index of the Mahābhārata, Being a Comprehensive Index of Verse-quarters Occurring in the Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata*, Ed. by P.L.Vaidya, Vol. I-VI. Poona, 1967-1972.

the royal garden, close to the aśoka-grove (*aśokavanikā*). In due course, queen Devayānī gave birth to a beautiful son. A little later, Śarmiṣṭhā, too, attained to puberty and saw that her season had come; yet she had no husband! And at this point of the narrative the Southern Recension inserts, or I would rather say, preserves a passage, full of precious, fascinating details: having bathed and purified herself, Śarmiṣṭhā, decorated with all her ornaments, went to the aśoka-grove, came up to an *aśoka*-tree, took a branch covered with bright flowers in one hand, took a mirror in the other and, looking into the mirror with the desire to see her future husband there (*bharṭṛdarśanalāsa*), pronounced the words:

*aśoka śokāpanuda śokopahatacetasam /*

*tvam nāmānam kuru kṣipram priyasamidarśanād dhi mām //*

(Mbh., Crit. ed., Ādiparvan, \*794; cf. text and translation of Rām. III. 60. 17 above).

The action described in this passage is undoubtedly a folk rite, namely, a young maiden's puberty rite, with some elements of fortune-telling<sup>28</sup>. The description makes it perfectly clear that the

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<sup>28</sup> One has to distinguish between folk puberty rites of this kind and the later custom of *udyānakriḍā* - "garden games" of court ladies. Although *udyānakriḍā* can possibly be traced, in its origin, to folk puberty rites, it lost any connection with the age group of girls who have attained puberty and become a pastime of all ladies at royal court. The *udyānakriḍā* included actions with various trees: ladies spat wine on the roots of the *bakula* tree or rubbed their breasts against the trunk of the *kurabaka* tree. "It was commonly believed that the tree of Aśoka does not bloom and the hero (Nāyaka) fails to show his strong emotion for longing unless the tree received the stroke (*prahāra*) of the left foot (*vāmapāda*)...of a charming lady under intoxication" (U.N. ROY, "Dohada" - a Folk-Custom of Ancient India", in *History and Culture. Dr. B.P.Sinha Felicitation Volume*, Ed. by BHAGWANT SAHAI. Delhi, 1987, p. 105). The obvious parallelism between the aśoka tree and a lover, Nāyaka (it is said sometimes that Aśoka and Nāyaka, with equal longing, wait for the stroke of a drunken lady's foot) gives some grounds to suggest that this act (defined in Classical literature by the term *dohada*) was not merely a game but could have originally, in common with other varieties of *udyānakriḍā*, the meaning of a love-magic charm. But, in any case, the custom of *udyānakriḍā* was a product of refined, aristocratic, perhaps even somewhat decadent culture of royal courts in the Late Antiquity and the Early Mediaeval period. Its earliest descriptions appear in classical plays of Kālidāsa. In the *Vākramorvaśyam*, Act IV, verse 62, Purūravas,

*aśoka*-tree was called *priyadarśana* not only because of the beauty of its flowers (in India there are many trees and plants with beautiful flowers, and at least one of them, like *aśoka*, had the word *priyadarśana* as their second name<sup>29</sup>). The words *aśoka priyadarśana* contained a double pun and had a second meaning. The *aśoka*-tree was called *priyadarśana* because it was believed that the tree could give a maiden a *darśana* (an opportunity to see) of her *priya* (i.e., predestined husband), the tree could allow the girl to see, in a special magic rite, the face of her would-be beloved. It is clear now, why in all the above-cited passages from the Sanskrit epic poetry the lover, separated from the object of his love, addresses none other than the *aśoka*-tree, with a request to let her/him see the beloved again. The answer is simple: because the *aśoka*-tree, according to the widely spread folk belief, had a special magic power to do so.

Provided with this stimulating evidence, we can be almost absolutely sure that the word *priyadarśana* in the language of the Sanskrit epic poetry served as the constant epithet of the *aśoka*-tree; then, after having been substantiated, was turned into a noun, synonymous of the name of the tree. In fact, the word *priyadarśana* in the language of Ancient Indian folklore was merely another name of the *aśoka*-tree.

What consequences does this have to our historical problem of the meaning of the Emperor's names? The newly-gained knowledge

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looking for Urvaśī, "says to the full-blossomed *aśoka* tree that shaking by its sides with the force of the wind, it was acknowledging its ignorance about his darling Urvaśī. But if it was a fact, then how it was glowing with full-grown lovely flowers, whose petals were being bitten by black bees, without receiving her foot-stroke?" (U.N. ROY, *op. cit.*, p. 107). It is evident that Kālidāsa tried to explain in this verse the old traditional situation (a lover in separation addresses an *aśoka*-tree) in the light of the later belief, connected with the custom of *dohada*. In the earlier, epic description of the same situation there is no trace of this later belief, the only reason for a lover to address the tree being its supposed ability to make the object of love visible.

<sup>29</sup> According to dictionaries, in Classical Sanskrit the noun *priyadarśana* was used as the name of the tree *kṣīrika* "Terminalia tomentosa, Mimusops Kauki L." (RĀJĀ RĀDHĀKANTA DEVA, *Śabdakalpadrumaḥ. Tṛtīyaḥ khāṇḍaḥ*, Delhi, 1987, p. 368; O. BÖHTLINGK, R. ROTH, *Sanskrit-Wörterbuch*, IV Theil, Delhi, 1990, p. 1164.

enables us to see the complete picture now perfectly clear. The prince, born in the Maurya family, was named after the *aśoka*-tree - not only a beautiful, but also a sacred tree, very popular in Ancient Indian folklore and religion. From the very beginning he was also called by the synonymous name, *Piyadassana* (with the forms *Piyadassa* and *Piyadasi*, identical in meaning). This initial state of affairs is reflected most adequately in the Buddhist historical chronicles where the names are used simultaneously. The same situation is evidenced by the earliest edicts of *Aśoka*, namely, by the data of MRE I and II, where (in some versions) both names are used. But later, in the subsequent period of *Aśoka*'s rule, the compilers of inscriptions show evident preference for only one name: *Piyadasi*. The reasons for it are obvious. In contrast to the name *Aśoka* and such synonymous forms as *Piyadas(s)a*, the name *Piyadasi* could be easily read and interpreted not as a "tree-name" (with the primary meaning: "pleasant to behold"), but in another sense, in the active meaning: "One-who-looks-with-kindness (compassion)-upon-his-subjects (upon all people)". Such a reading of the name was in perfect accord with the image of a kind and pious ruler, the image that either the compilers of the edicts or the royal author himself wanted and strove to create.