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The Legend of Ashoka's Hell and References to the Torture Chamber of the Mauryan Emperor in Ajñeya's Play *Uttar Priyadarśī*

Abstract

This paper discusses the legend of Ashoka's hell relating to the ancient Indian emperor of Maurya dynasty and his conversion to Buddhism as depicted by the Hindi writer Ajñeya¹ (1911–1987) in his play *Uttar Priyadarśī* of 1967 as well as references made by him to a torture chamber in the imperial palace in Pataliputra. The thesis proposed here is that Ajñeya, while re-telling the old Buddhist legend and referring it to the emperor's material prison, seeks to renew how it is perceived and prove its underlying concept. While looking for overlaps between history and legend and focusing on Ashoka's prison-hell, he aims to present the truth about the reason and manner of the emperor's conversion. References to the Buddhist story in Indian and Chinese versions and history of Ashoka are studied to reveal their mutual role in the play. His version of the tale is compared to the relevant part of the *Aśokāvadāna*, regarded as the most reliable source on the legend of Ashoka. It is illustrated by passages from Ajñeya's play translated for the first time in this paper and the available English translations of the *Aśokāvadāna* with some references to its text in Sanskrit. The analysis presented here proves that the playwright emphasises descriptions of torture and terror that correspond to the state of Ashoka's mind, which is tormented by the phantoms of war against the state of Kalinga. Thus, he provides psychological insight into the main protagonist's Self. Ajñeya transforms the legend by making the emperor's regret the main reason for his renunciation of war and conversion to Buddhism. He also changes its ending so that it suits the final message of his play. Priyadarshi's salvation from hell has to be read as liberation from one's exaggerated Self, the reason for his suffering, which is only possible once it is renounced. The analysis proves Ajñeya's skills in evoking an ancient dramatic style, and language while presenting Ashoka's dilemma as a modern conflict. In the end, the motif of "entering hell" is referred to as one of the oldest known topoi in world literature.

Keywords: Ashoka, Ashoka's hell, Ajñeya/Agyeya, Hindi drama, *kāvya-nāṭak*

1 The writer's pen-name *Ajñeya* is a term derived from Sanskrit and means "to be unknowable," "to be unrecognizable." In Hindi it is pronounced as *Agyey* – with an inherent "a" at the end. The form which prevails in works translated into English by the writer himself and in studies of him is either *Ajñeya* or *Agyeya*. The form following the conventions of Sanskrit transliteration is used in this paper.

There is always something to look forward to in the excitement of reading the past in order to understand the present.²

When, in 1967, Ajñeya (Saccidānand Hirānand Vātsyāyan, 1911–1987) published his play *Uttar Priyadarśi* (“The Transformation of Priyadarshi”³, [1967] 2010), wishing to attract the attention of Hindi readers to a cruel prison created by Emperor Ashoka (268–232 BC) and the legend centred on it, Indian historians were preoccupied with Ashokan edicts as historical sources.⁴ Later, they were also to refer to legends in their search for truth and myth about Ashoka and his time (Thapar, Chakravarti 2015: 19). When, in 1963, the *Aśokāvadāna*, “The Tale of Ashoka” of the 2nd century AD, was critically edited, it was regarded even by its editor as nothing more than “Buddhist propaganda” without any references to history.⁵ However, modern researchers studying the legends about Ashoka and his edicts are “looking to the latter for potential roots of the former and to the former for potential elucidation of the latter” (Strong 2009: 95). The primary aim of modern studies is to find layers that confirm each other – in the edicts, chronicles, and legends (Strong 2009: 96; Voss 2016: 11; Deeg: 2009: 114–123). Ajñeya, one of the most significant writers of 20th-century Hindi literature, seems to have acted in the same way much earlier. The thesis proposed here is that the writer while re-telling the old Buddhist legend about Ashoka’s hell and referring it to the material existence of the emperor’s prison, seeks to renew how it is perceived, prove its underlying concept, and points at it as an element of history in the legend. While looking for overlaps between history and legend, he aims to present the truth about the reason and manner of the emperor’s conversion. This should have some relevance for modern Indian readers. References to this Buddhist story and Ashoka’s history will be studied here to reveal their mutual role in Ajñeya’s play. It will be illustrated both by passages from Ajñeya’s play, including an introduction to it, translated for the first time in this paper and by quotations from the available English translations of the *Aśokāvadāna* with some references to the text in Sanskrit. In the introduction to his drama, entitled *Prerṇā* (“The Impulse”), the writer poses two questions:

History researchers say only: the great conqueror of Kalinga, Priyadarshi Ashoka, renounced the world and turned towards Buddhism after becoming emperor. Why? How? They give no answer to it. [...] Is there a connection between the building of the hell, victory over Kalinga, the emperor’s arrogance and emerging from his blindness? When historians cannot find answers to it, why may a poet-playwright not ask them at least.⁶ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 651)

To provide answers to these questions he searches for overlaps in the history and the legend. Thus, with this objective in mind, he retells the tale of Ashoka in a version based on travel accounts to Pataliputra, then the capital of the Maurya Empire, by Chinese pilgrims of the 5th and the 7th centuries, and quotes from an amateur archaeologist L. A. Waddell’s report⁷ on the excavations conducted in this

2 These are Romila Thapar’s words, the renowned historian of India, quoted from her interview (Thapar, Chakravarti 2015: 5).

3 The other possible English equivalents of the title of this drama will be discussed in the next sections of this paper.

4 Among them Romila Thapar, the author of *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* first published in 1961, see: Thapar (2012a).

5 Mukhopadhyaya (1963: XXXI).

6 Unless otherwise stated, the original Hindi text is translated by the author of this paper. See: kaliṅg ke mahāpratāpī vijetā priyadarśi aśok ko samrāt banne ke bād vairāgya huā aur usne bauddh-dharm kī dīkṣā le li, aisā itihāskār batāte hāi. kyō? kaise? Iskā koi uttar itihāskār nahī dete. [...] kyā narak ke nirmān, kaliṅg-vijay, rājā ke darp aur us ke moh-bhaṅg mē koi sambandh rahā? itihāskār jin praśnō kā uttar nahī dete, unhē kyā kavi-nāṭakkār pūch bhī nahī saktā?

7 Laurence Austine Waddell (1854-1938) was a scientist, an explorer and a surgeon in the British Army in India, where in Pataliputra he carried out and supervised archaeological excavations. His achievements haven’t received any serious academic recognition, but they were quite popular with the public (Basak 2008, Thomas 2004). An official report of his excavations in

city in years of 1892–99.⁸ For the period of an alleged lack of historical sources on Ashoka, until the emperor's edicts were deciphered in the 19th century, *āvadānas* ("legends")⁹ and *vaṃśas* ("chronicles") provided biographical information about him. The *Aśokāvadāna* is a part of the anthology of *Divyāvadāna* ("Divine Tales")¹⁰ and is regarded as the most reliable source, one which presents the "basic version of the Sanskrit recension of Asoka's legend", the other lost versions of it having been popularised in translations in China (Strong 1983). Moreover, narratives in the Pali language were spread throughout Sri Lanka and compiled in the *Mahāvamśa* ("Great Chronicle") of the 5th century AD.

The analysis presented here aims to prove that Ajñeya refers to the mode of ruling by Ashoka from the time of his cruel conquest in India than to the model of Buddhist kinship associated with him after his renunciation of war and conversion to Buddhism.¹¹ Thus he emphasises descriptions of torture and terror that correspond to the state of Ashoka's mind which is tormented by the phantoms of war against the state of Kalinga. The writer provides by this a psychological insight into the main protagonist's Self. The playwright transforms the legend by introducing the description of the emperor's remorse and changes its ending so that it suits the final message of his play. Priyadarshi's salvation from hell has to be read as liberation from one's exaggerated Self, which caused so much suffering on the earth. It is only possible once it is renounced. Ajñeya directs this message to his contemporaries in the time of integration of the newly democratic country, whose rulers with Jawaharlal Nehru ahead, have accepted insignias of Ashoka as symbols of own policy (Lahiri 2015: 14).

Ajñeya and his play

In the late 1960s, Ajñeya was an acclaimed author of three novels, over 60 short stories, 11 collections of poetry, and numerous essays,¹² and was a very influential personality in literary circles.¹³ All of his works provide testimony to his strong interests in Indian literary tradition and cultural history. Ajñeya strove

Pataliputra, including a map of ruins of Mauryan palace, was published in 1903. Although he failed to unearth the lost Mauryan capital, and found only „portions of old brick walls, broken fragments of old pillars and a pillar capital...” he initiated diggings in Patna, which were being carried on by D. B. Spooner in the years 1912-15 (Archaeological Survey of India, <https://asi.nic.in/site-of-mauryan-palace-kumrahar/>) and nowadays by professional archaeologists (Mukherjee 2009: 248–249).

8 According to Archeological Survey of India. See: <https://asi.nic.in/excavations-important-bihar>.

9 *Avadānas* as genre are similar to *jātakas*, they both contain didactical stories from ancient literature belonging to Buddhism or the Brahmanic canon. Most of them contain a precept and have an illustrious person as a hero. They used to be composed in prose mixed with verse *śloka* (*anuṣṭubh*) (Mukhopadhaya 1983: 54).

10 This compiles narratives from north-western India, dated to around 2nd century AD. The name of the compiler or the author of the text is unknown, neither of the Sanskrit nor Chinese versions (Mukhopadyaya 1963: VII).

11 For discussion of Ashoka as a model of Buddhist ruler see: Deeg (2017), Deeg (2012).

12 Ajñeya's famous novels are *Śekhar.Ek jivni* in 2 vols ("Śekhar. An Autobiography", 1941-42), *Nadi ke dvīp* ("The Islands in the Stream", 1951), *Apne apne ajnabi* ("To Each his Stranger", 1961). He published his first short stories collection *Vipathagā* ("The Woman who Treads the Wrong Path") in 1937 and the last one *Ye tere pratirup* ("These are Your Images") in 1961. The first anthology of his poetry appeared in 1933 – *Bhagnadūt* ("The Vanished Messenger"). His last lyrical volumes appeared in 1975 (*Aisā koi ghar apne dekhā ha?*, "Have You Seen Such a House?"), and posthumously in 1995 (*Maruthal*, "The Desert").

13 He initiated a literary movement *Prayogvād* (Experimentalism) in the 1940s and acted as the editor of *Tār Saptak* ("High Septet") in 1943, an anthology of Hindi poetry, and its following similar collections in 1951, 1959, thus laying the foundation for the school of *Nayī Kavītā* (New Poetry).

to build a bridge between the literary tradition and modernity and maintain it (Nandan 2010: 5–8). Indeed, as he sought to depict reality within its various layers, both mythical and material, to be able to touch the truths hidden within them, Ajñeya often went against the tendencies prevailing in the Hindi literature of his time (Miążek 2015: 176–181). He published his poetical drama *Uttar Priyadarśī*¹⁴ when Hindi drama was under the strong influence of Mohan Rakesh,¹⁵ who postulated a very realistic approach in the treatment of themes and protagonists based on writers' own experiences.¹⁶ As a writer, he strives to modify common perception of ancient truths hidden in legends to prove their notion in a new and modern context. In some of his short stories (*Kalakār kī mukti* "The Liberation of the Artist", *Alikhit kahānī* "Unwritten Story") he shows how to transform ancient tales to present their symbolic truths in a new light so that they evoke a response from modern readers. Thus, he asks: "Do symbolic truths ever change? Is there ever any change in collective perception? But growth is in itself a change and if a poet does not modify his perception, what's the use of his sensibility?" (Ajñeya 1992: 602). Although the tales of Ashoka had been treated in Hindi drama prior to Ajñeya, this had been done with a different approach.¹⁷ In *Uttar Priyadarśī* the writer focuses on the emperor's salvation from the hell of his own exaggerated Self. Ajñeya informs us that his play had been staged in New Delhi in 1967 before its publication in book form, as an open-air performance at Triveni Kala Sangam ([1967] 2010: 652). It then became popular at the end of the 20th century thanks to Ratan Thiyam,¹⁸ one of the founders of the Theater of Roots, who adapted it into the Meitei (Manipuri) dialect in 1996 and staged in 1999 at the 1st Indian Theatre Festival at the National School of Drama in Delhi. Later, he took this play with his Chorus Repertory Theatre to Australia, the United States (Winn 2000) and Switzerland (Kaushal, Sharma 2013). Ajñeya's play is distinguished by its lyrical form, the use of songs and rhythm and by its mythical theme interspersed with history. It belongs to the genre of poetical drama, in Hindi *kāvya-nāṭak* or *gīti-nāṭak* (Garg 1992: 234; Gaeffke 1978: 84). Ajñeya suggests that its stage performance should be kept in a simple theatrical style (*nāṭya dharmī*) (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 653). Stage directions regarding the plot provide precise information about the scenography, rhythm, light and movements, which are intended to build up or calm the emotional impact of the play, known in theory as *rasa*. Thus, the play is a perfectly designed for the stage, in spite of the fact that Ajñeya used to act primarily as a poet and novelist. The songs, performed by two main singers with the support of a chanting choir,¹⁹ have to outline the story behind the main plot. Moreover, the Sanskritised lexical style of the text in Hindi has to resemble remote past times. The introductory part is written in prose, the main plot consists of dialogues and monologues structured as verses, which may resemble the form of the *Aśokāvadāna*. The plot is not formally divided into acts and scenes. Both at the beginning and end, Ajñeya introduces a structural framework in the form of mantras

14 This is one of his only two plays, the other one being *Kavīpriya* ("The Beloved of the Poet") of 1949.

15 Mohan Rakeś (1925–1972), a Hindi writer famous for his dramas, novels and short stories. One of the founders of *Nayī Kahānī* (the New Short Story) movement in Hindi prose.

16 Vasudha Dalmia presents an analysis of Rakesh's idea of realism and conflict (Dalmia 2006: 123–126).

17 Such as that by Jayashankar Prasad (Jayaśankar Prāsad, 1886–1937) in *Aśok* of 1912. Girish Chandra Ghosh (Giriścandra Ghoṣ 1844–1912) has published in Bengali a play *Aśok* around the same time (Gaeffke 1978: 96–97). The story of Ashoka also became a popular theme in Indian cinema: in 2001 a film *Aśoka* was made by Santosh Shivan, and shown at the Venice Film Festival.

18 Ratan Thiyam (born 1948), known for his Manipuri martial style in theatre, staged plays resembling ancient Indian forms in the contemporary context. His Theatre of Roots appeared in India at the end of the 1970s as a reaction against plays modelled on the Western stage and deprived of traditional singing, music, or dance.

19 The choir is called *bhaṭ cāraṇ-gaṇ*, "a group of bards and minstrels" (Ajñeya 2010: 654).

glorifying Buddha: “bow to Buddha” used interchangeably with phrases: “contemplate [the nature of...]” ([1967] 2010: 656, 680). By using them also as a refrain, the writer evokes the style of *dhāraṇīs*, namely pithy verses, preserved in the countries associated with Buddhism.²⁰ The way of building an emotional mode in the play, known in theory as *rasa*, shifts from heroism (in Sanskr. *vīra*) and terror (*bhayānaka*) to pity (*karuṇa*) and astonishment (*adbhuta*).²¹ Episodes of the plot are separated by the entrance of singers, who then announce the entrances of the main protagonist, the Emperor Priyadarshi, and one after another – of a minister, “the Terrible One” (a prison guard), and a mendicant monk. Ajñeya provided directions concerning their costumes: “The Terrible One (the god Yam) will enter the scene wearing a mask on his face; [...] all other characters in ordinary people’s clothing. Priyadarshi in emperor’s robes. The Minister in the attire adequate to his rank and all the Singers in monastic habits”²² ([1967] 2010: 653). The main action of the plot takes place during one day in the hall of the emperor’s palace in Pataliputra and the dungeons of his prison-hell. This should be symbolised on stage by “a fortified wall” at the back of the stage, a tree, and a cupola of a palace. The historical period in which the action is set takes place after Ashoka’s war with Kalinga (261–260 BC). While narrating past episodes, the singers expand on the plot.

The title of the play as the link between history and legend

The term *Priyadarśī* in the title of Ajñeya’s play refers to the emperor’s personal name, which provides a link between history and legend. Although it was used in Ashokan edicts, it does not occur in the *Aśokāvadāna*, as in the part of it to which Ajñeya refers, the king is called *Aśoka* (Strong 1983). In Sanskrit, the latter term means “not causing sorrow” or “not feeling sorrow” (Monier-Williams 1899: 113). According to legend, the name *Aśoka* was given to the king due to his mother’s wish, as she was without sorrow (*aśoka*) at his birth. Tieken argues that the name *Priyadarśī* provides the link between the edicts and the legends and as such has been based mainly on “the name Piyadassi, which in Pāli sources is indeed used for *Aśoka*” (2002: 35). In Hindi, the term *priyadarśī*, as an adjective and masculine noun derived from Sanskrit, means “looking kindly” or “one, who looks with kindness” (McGregor 1993: 670, 483; Monier-Williams 1899: 710). Tieken is convinced that this term was originally a part of Ashoka’s descriptive title and not a personal name (2002: 36). Deshpande proves that in the edicts it invariably occurs in association with the term *devānaṃpiya* (2009: 19), while in Sanskrit *devānaṃpriya*, means: “beloved of the gods” (Monier-Williams: 495). Scholars agree that in Ashoka’s time it served both as a mode of address and an honorific term regarding kings (Deshpande 2009: 20; Tieken 2002: 23; Kartunnen 2009: 106, Voss 2016: 5). However, the emperor of these edicts never used the single name Ashoka or Priyadarshi (Keny 1959: 88). Buddhist tales suppressed the epithet *devānaṃpriya*, thereby causing its association with the term *priyadarśī* to be lost (Deshpande 2009: 35). In Ajñeya’s play, the main protagonist is called Priyadarshi (in Hindi: Priyadarśī) and occurs as Ashoka (Hindi: Aśok) only once in the main plot and a few times

20 Griffiths mentions that *dhāraṇīs* – lines known from stone inscriptions as “pithy verses” (*gāthās*), have been preserved in India, Sri Lanka, China, Korea, Japan, Afghanistan, and Tibet. Most of them repeat mantras *om namo buddhāya namo dharmāya namah samghāya*, which he translates as “Om! Homage to the Buddha, Homage to the Dharma, Homage to the Samgha” (2014: 138–159).

21 The issue of building the dominating emotional mode in this drama deserves a separate study, which should be an object of an analysis in another paper.

22 Ghor (Yam) mukhautā pahan kar praveś karegā; [...] anya sab pātr sādharāṇ mānav rūp mē. priyadarśī rāj-veś, mantri padānukṛt bhūṣā mē; bhikṣu aur saṃvādak-vaṇḍ sab bhikṣu-veśi hōge.

in the introduction, where the Chinese version of the legend is quoted. It seems that by including this name in the title of his play, the writer points to the image of the historical emperor that is supposed to be conveyed by the edicts. The second element of the title of Ajñeya's work *uttar* is an innovation added by the writer. It is an adjective and noun neuter in Hindi, which means: "further"; "following", "subsequent" or "surpassing" and "best", and also "answer" or "response".²³ The whole title seems to be elusive: it rather suggests the image of the emperor after conversion, though the plot of the drama depicts episodes before and in the very moment of it. The choir only once addresses the main protagonist as *Uttarpriyadarsī*, written as a compound, while re-telling an episode from Buddhist legend about the emperor's previous life as a boy who had met Buddha (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 658). This may provide a hint to read the title of the drama as "Priyadarshi from the North" as the legend about Ashoka's hell was transmitted in the version popularised in India in the North. On the other side, the rendering of the title as "The Transformation of Priyadarshi" conveys more meaning than a possible literal translation from Hindi. It resonates with the transformation of the main character of the play and also with its stage adaptation by Thiyam as "The Final Beatitude" (Winn 2000). This emphasises the emperor's blissful state after he received salvation from remorse resulting from both a cruel war which he fought and from his exaggerated Self.

The war with Kalinga and the emperor who grieves

Historical facts about Ashoka were provided only in 1837 thanks to the European Orientalist, James Prinsep (1799–1840), who deciphered the Brāhmī and Karoṣṭhī scripts of the emperor's stone inscriptions (Kulke, Rothermund 2010: 38, Karttunen 2009: 106). Up to this time, the only source about Ashoka were Buddhist tales in Sanskrit and Pali (Karttunen 2009: 103), or narratives transmitted orally (Lahiri 2015, 10–11). The Ashokan edicts helped to establish the chronology of early Indian history and provided material proof of it (Stein 2010: 73, Tieken 2002: 39). Distributed over a vast area from Afghanistan to southern India, they promoted both the emperor's new policy and Buddhist ethics across his empire. Rock Edict XIII refers to the past, to Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga, and contains an expression of the emperor's remorse for the suffering of his subjects. (Kulke, Rothermund 2010: 38; Tieken 2002: 22, 34; Deeg 2009: 114; Mukopadhyaya 1963: XXXI). Deeg argues that its content provides the best example of overlaps between the emperor's history and the legend about him (2009: 117). He proves that in the legend from the *Aśokāvadāna*, the king's regret is not mentioned, nor is it an object of moral judgment in the Sri Lankan chronicles (2009: 118), but it is known as the turning point in Ashoka's decision to adopt Buddhism. Thus Ajñeya while focusing on the Emperor's grief refers to him rather as a historical personality who, in Rock Edict XIII (RE XIII), expresses it. Tieken argues that even when the edicts present only an image of a ruler and not a historical person, they were engraved according to Ashoka's orders (2002: 7, 31). But the prevailing image of Ashoka in the edicts is that of a Buddhist ruler and his policy of "dharma": namely, religious tolerance, social concern, moral ethics, ecological awareness, and the renunciation of war. Deeg argues that Ashokan edicts present the idea of integrating the Buddhist community (*saṅgha*) "into the state ideology", which differentiates them from the *Aśokāvadāna*, where "a balance between the ruler and the *saṅgha*" is depicted (2009: 112–113). Research endeavours on Ashoka show how numerous and varied approaches had to be used in an attempt to differentiate fact from fiction in his life. The emperor's image presented in them may neither reflect his true personality nor the real

23 And also "late (as a period of time)"; "last" "future"; "upper", "outer"; "northern" (McGregor 1993: 121).

reasons for his policy. His transformation was a fact that took place after the war mentioned in RE XIII. As already said this edict provides a testimony of the suffering of many people: "Even a hundredth or a thousandth part only of the people who were slain, killed or abducted in Kalinga is now considered as a grievous loss by Devanampiya" (Kulke, Rothermund 2010: 38). During this war, 150,000 people were kidnapped from their homes, 100,000 were killed in battle, and much more subsequently died (Voss 2016: 13, Kulke, Rothermund 2010: 38). In the 3rd century BC, Ashoka's military conquests were unique, as was his striving for its ethical legitimization in Buddhism. Later Ashoka's policy relied predominantly on the principle of nonviolence (*ahimsa*) and the renunciation of killing. The only form of war considered to be a victory was that conducted through *dharma* according to Buddhist ethics. Wandering Buddhist monks and special envoys (*mahāmatras*) sent to the newly conquered regions of his empire were the means of maintaining peace after the war (Karttunen 2010: 106; Stein 2010: 74). In RE V C the emperor is called in Pali *ādikale kayyānassa*, "the one who starts to practise altruism" (Tieken 2002: 32). Scholars agree that the Kalinga War and Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism were the most important facts of his reign (Stein 2010: 42–43, Deeg 2009: 114). Moreover, during the following 40 years, he led his empire to the peak of its development.²⁴ But after death around 232 BC his historical persona ceased, „yet in the centuries after his death his memory lived on, and in ways that go well beyond the events and drama of his life. His afterlife is in fact a configuration of diverse and fascinating threads made up of material relics and writings stretching across more than two millennia." (Lahiri 2015: 289)

The legend of "Ashoka's hell" from the *Aśokāvadāna*

The story of a torture chamber in the dungeons of Ashoka's palace is one of the most intriguing issues among archaeologists who still while digging in Bihar search for remnants of the former Mauryan capital Pataliputra (Lahiri 2015:17). In Buddhist narratives, it appears as the episode known as "Ashoka's hell" with the king's conversion as its climax. Buddhist tradition emphasised the emperor's cruelty to make the moment of his transformation more effective. But in real life Ashoka was a cruel emperor. The story is related in the first chapter of the *Aśokāvadāna* entitled *Pāmsupradānāvadāna*, "The Tale of the Gift of Dust" (Mukhopadyaya 1963: XVIII). Deeg proves that the legend narrated in this tale collection has its chronological order, partly same as in *Vaṃśas*, its elements occur in the following biographical scheme: prophecy of a Buddhist ideal king in a later existence; a violent king in the early period of reign; a conversion by a miraculous encounter; teaching of the dharma to the king by Buddhist master; a pilgrimage to most important Buddhist places; getting hold of Buddhism's sacred relicts; erections of *stūpas* to protect relicts; calling a council; the king becoming *cakravartin* ("one who turns the wheel of time")²⁵ – a righteous world-ruler protecting Buddhism; the ruler installing ceremony during which he gives himself to *saṅgha* and makes donations; ruler finds tragic end (2012: 357). In his play, Ajñeya refers only to the part of the legend till the moment of Ashoka's conversion. In *Aśokāvadāna* it is narrated in the first chapter, episodes

24 Stein argues that the realm of Ashoka was "a discontinuous set of several core regions separated by very large areas occupied by relatively autonomous peoples." (2010: 74). Important trade routes linked these regions and, according to the legend, the Emperor himself travelled along them on a year-long pilgrimage.

25 Sanskrit term *cakravartin* means as adjective "rolling everywhere without obstruction" an as a noun masculine: „a ruler the wheels of whose chariot roll everywhere without obstruction, emperor, sovereign of the world". See: Monier-Williams (1899: 381).

are set in a mythical time, one hundred years after the Buddha's enlightenment when King Ashoka is a ruler called "Ashoka the Fierce" (Strong 1983: 217)²⁶. It includes the following elements: his birth as a son of King Bindusāra; the prophecy of a wandering monk foretelling his destiny as a future ruler; and the king's march to Takṣasīla and his ascendance to the throne after his father's death. As king, Ashoka is portrayed as a very cruel person, who cuts the heads of 500 ministers, burns alive 500 concubines as they had chopped off all flowers and branches of his *Aśoka* tree; issues orders to summon an executioner to help him kill wicked people. With that, a ferocious youth from the countryside, named *Girika*, a person capable of killing animals and even his parents, is appointed by Ashoka as the only ruler of his prison. He is described as *Caṇḍagirika* – "Girika the Fierce", and ready to execute the whole kingdom if ordered to do so. A description of the prison is provided: "it was lovely from the outside as far as the gate, but inside it was a very frightful place and people called it "the beautiful gaol" (Strong 1983: 212–213). The next episode concerns *Girika*, who learns about various types of torture inflicted on people reborn in hell. The culmination concerns a young Buddhist monk named Samudra who enters the prison and, terrified by this hell-like abode, wants to withdraw but is stopped by the executioner. A description of the ensuing torture follows: people "were ground with pestles in an iron mortar until only their bones remained" (Strong 1983: 212). However, the description of the monk's torture reveals a miracle:

That unmerciful monster, feeling no pity in his heart and indifferent to the world, threw Samudra into an iron cauldron full of water, human blood, marrow, urine, and excrement. He lit a great fire underneath, but even after much firewood has been consumed, the cauldron did not get hot. Once more he tried to light the fire, but again it would not blaze. He became puzzled, and looking into the pot, he saw the monk seated there, cross-legged on a lotus. (Strong 1983: 216)

After the monk realises how worthless a human body is, he is depicted as being detached from the physical world. Ashoka's redemption is narrated next as he enters this hell and, impressed by the monk's magical powers, asks for enlightenment. Afterwards, the Buddha's prophecy about Ashoka becoming a *cakravartin* is revealed: "ruling over four continents, a righteous *dharmarāja*" (Strong 1983: 217), Ashoka is urged by Samudra to protect all living beings and duly promises to seek refuge in the Buddha (Strong 1983: 218). In Ajñeya's play, most of the above-mentioned episodes are narrated, he omits some beginning stories about the monk Upagata, Ashoka's spiritual teacher, as well stories from the king's previous life. Some names are changed, thus he retells first introductory episodes: about a boy named Jaya who, while playing on the road, throws a handful of dirt into the Buddha's begging bowl; the prophecy of him being reborn as King Ashoka; the description of marvels associated with the arrival of the Buddha and the rays of his smile penetrating various hells, both cold and hot, calming them respectively²⁷. Next, the narrative focuses on the main episode of Ashoka's hell. Here a clash between Ashoka and the guard of the hell is changed by Ajñeya when compared with the *Aśokāvadāna*. In the legend after the departure of Samudra, the executioner wants to slay Ashoka as he had broken his word and entered the prison. However, the king explains that the guard had entered this hell first, and orders the executioner himself to be tortured. The guard is duly beheaded, his cruel prison destroyed and the king becomes "Ashoka the Righteous". In

26 Mukhopadhyaya 1963: XI; Strong (1983: 210).

27 In Buddhism a hell is either hot or cold, according to differing ways of torturing sinners (Strong 1983: 221; Braavik 2009). The idea of hell in Buddhism deserves a separate study and goes beyond limits of the paper presented here.

Ajñeya's play, the guard of hell is saved from death, it will be discussed in detail in the section on the plot of the play. The rest of the chronological episodes from the legend are omitted in the play.

Ashoka's prison-hell from the Chinese sources in Ajñeya's play

Before the real text of play starts, Ajñeya in the introductory refers to the Buddhist pilgrims, Faxian and Xuanzang, who in the 5th and 7th century AD visited Pataliputra, the capital of the Mauryan Empire, and were well-acquainted with the story of "Ashoka's hell". He first quotes from Faxian's account: "outside the city of Pataliputra he had seen certain fortified wall which was called the boundary of the hell built on Ashoka's orders"²⁸, and next from "The Legend of Ashoka's Hell"²⁹ giving as its source: "A Journey to India, a Journey to Magadha" (*Bhārat- yātrā, Magadh-yātrā*) of 405 AD by Faxian ([1967] 2010: 651–655). He relates the following in prose episodes that resemble the *Aśokāvadāna*: Ashoka as a child gave a handful of dirt to a monk, and later became a king; Ashoka saw a hell walled in between two hills, the world of Yama (the lord of the dead) created to torture villains, and immediately wished to build a similar one, where his enemies would be kept; the king set out on a journey to find the most cruel man to guard his hell; he ordered the building of a fence with high walls and arranged flowers, trees, and a lake to attract people while securing it with a heavy and very strong gate. Whoever passed through it was to be captured and tortured for the sins they had committed, even the king himself. The key episode concerns a wandering monk who, having entered this hell, was captured by the king's servants who began to torture him. While there, he watched as they ground another man in a stone crusher, out of which a red foam of blood began to flow. He then realised how mortal one's body is, how much life is deprived of sense, as a foam bubble, and thus achieved a state of Buddhahood. When the servants threw him into a boiling cauldron, his face continued to express unchanged contentment. Moreover, the fire then extinguished itself, the cauldron became cold while in the middle, a lotus flower blossomed, with the monk found sitting crossed-legged at its centre. Having heard what had taken place from his servants, the king went to witness the miracle for himself, thereby breaking his resolution of not entering there. The monk preached to him and Ashoka obtained salvation. The king duly ordered the destruction of this hell, atoned for his sins, and started to devote himself to Buddha, his *dharma*, and the Buddhist community.³⁰ The main difference between this story by Faxian, which Ajñeya quotes, and the *Aśokāvadāna* lies in the more expressive depiction of torture and the king's final subservience to *saṅgha*. After narrating this story, Ajñeya refers to Xuanzang to contend that his account conformed with facts as reported by Faxian ([1967] 2010: 651). Next, he quotes from the archaeological report by L. A. Waddell, who "found remains in the ground that matched the descriptions by Faxian and Xuanzang"³¹ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 651). This amateur archaeologist

28 pācvī śati ke cinī yātrī phāhyān ne batāyā hai ki pātaliputr kī nagar-simā ke bāhar usne ek divār dekhī thī jo aśok ke banvāye hue narak kī prācir batāyī jāti thī.

29 He calls it *kathā*, a term which in Hindi means "story", "tale", "legend" and , "sacred legend", "narration", "report" and "rumour" (McGregor 1993: 163).

30 The Three Jewels (Sanskrit. *triratna*, "three gems") of Buddhism are: the Buddha, *dharma* "the law", *saṅgha* "the monkish brotherhood" (Monier-Williams 1899: 460).

31 unnīsvī śati ke antim dinō mē angrez sainik purātattv premī vaiḍel ne pātaliputr mē jo khudāi karāyī thī, usmē use aise sthaliy avāṣeṣ mile the jo phāhyān aur hyuen tsān ke varṇan se mel khāte the.

associates this “hell” with “a well”³² located between the city and the palace, close to the emperor’s moats at the market.³³ He assumes that the “hell” from Xuanzang’s account may relate to the site of a royal slaughterhouse or out-kitchen, as although a well existed there at the end of 19th century. He claims that Jain priests serving in the temple adjoining this “well” at the time when excavations were being carried out still related the story of Ashoka’s hell in a version consistent with accounts of the Chinese pilgrims (Waddell 1903: 45). Modern Indian researchers maintain that *Agam Kuan* (*Agam kuā*, dosł. “unfathomable well”), a well and archaeological site in modern Patna, could serve in ancient Pataliputra as a prison for torturing people, famous as a “fiery well or hell on the earth.” (Vishnu 1993: 173) Ajñeya, while referring to the aforementioned accounts of Chinese travellers and Waddell, strives to add as much credibility as possible to the existence of the prison created by Ashoka. Indeed, by infusing as much realism as possible to the legend, he provides dramaturgy and makes it a perfect material for the plot of his play.

History and legend in the plot of *Uttar Priyadarśī*

The main plot of Ajñeya’s play starts with a description of the emperor’s distress caused by the phantoms of the dead and their voices. Before this, the singers incant Buddhist mantras and narrate the most significant episodes from Ashoka’s story, which to some extent, mentioned above, correspond to the legend of “Ashoka’s hell”, but also to the edicts. Such structuring of the narrative enables the time of the plot to shift from one space to the other, from the present to the past. Singers address the emperor as “The Beloved by Gods Piyadarshi” (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 657), which corresponds to the emperor’s title from the edicts. They sing story from his previous life when he as the boy offered a handful of dirt to *Śākyamuni* (the Buddha), and his ascendance to the throne as “the future king of the earth” (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 657). Firstly, the emperor is addressed as *cakravartin* and “an emperor”, “the ruler of the world”, “perishing of enemies”. In addition, the historical conquest of Kalinga is mentioned: “the grinding down of the prosperity of Kalinga” (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 659–662), thus setting both the time of this event and its historical context. The choir repeats the emperor’s form of addresses “His Majesty, the Beloved of the Gods” in Hindi and Sanskrit and expresses the emperor’s unlimited power and glory: “the Only Ruler”, “the Unparalleled”, “Indifferent to obstacles”, while the emperor calls himself: “Priyadarshi the Supreme Lord” and “a great king of kings”, as well as describing the extent of his rule “as far as the ocean and the horizon” (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 661–663). Next, as the evening approaches, he mistrusts his power and expresses a longing for the blue tenderness of the night, which brings consolation regarding “the sin of his heart” through “parental love” (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 663). He is shown as being filled with remorse, feeling the burden of power, while the ghosts of the dead haunt him by knocking continuously at the gate of the “hell” in his mind (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 664). This passage provides a reference to Ashokan RE

32 According to him the water from it was never drunk as the place was associated with “heat” and “hell”, and local women and children worshipped there in the hot season and threw coins and flowers seeking protection from disfigurement caused by smallpox (Waddell 1903: 45–46).

33 „... where were found the cluster of beam-palisades and large stones marking apparently a position of a tower as already described. Near the South of this latter point [...] is the celebrated holy well, called the ‘*Agam Kuan*’. This sacred well, the name of which literally seems to mean ‘the Fiery Well’, appears to me to be a surviving vestige of the so-called ‘hell’ of Asoka with its fiery cauldrons, which the later monkish legend credited Asoka with having deliberately made to torture poor people, Nero-like, in the days before his conversion to Buddhism” (Waddell 1903: 43–44).

XIII and the emperor's grief. It also serves as evidence of Ajñeya's creative approach while the writer adds a motif of the emperor being haunted by ghosts, which is absent in the legend. The above description of hell could be regarded as the first type of hell depicted in the play. The description of the emperor's vision of an army of ghosts coming from the battlefield follows it:

As if the army of all headless bodies
trampling on their own skulls with their own feet
is approaching closer and closer
while stretching out hands –
uncultured, uncontrolled-
countless platoons of foes! [...]
Unresting
These shameless ghosts as if having broken the gate
Knock at the door of the hell?
Why? Why? Why?³⁴ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 664)

The emperor is not able to get rid of these unruly ghosts, either by words promoting his glory or by warnings they will be tortured in his prison, which the choir expresses. The tortures of his mind are described as a "piercing torment" (*kaṛī yantrṇā*) or the "torment of hell" (*narak-yantrṇā*). The guard of this hell comes to the palace and listens to the choir, who re-echoes the emperor's doubts with irony:

Where is your hell, Emperor?
Where are the subservient folk?
The defeated army-
are those bodiless rivals?³⁵ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 666)

The emperor then calls the minister and orders a search of the hell governed by him:

I want hell!
I will torture the ghosts of foes who in my body
cause a shiver of fear
with their still bodiless touch!
To hell with them!
My reign may be broken!
Tortures!
I want hell!³⁶ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 666–667)

The minister swears that he never breaks the "honour of his rank" (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 666) and follows the order.³⁷ When he withdraws, the guard of the prison demands to be the only lord of this hell. In the following verses, there is a "fortified wall" or "rampart" (*parkoṭā*) mentioned as a structure of the prison.

34 Sab ruṇḍō kī senā jaise/ apne muṇḍ raundte apne hī caranō se-/ baṛhte hī āte haī/ hāth baṛhaye-/ durvīnit, duḥśāsyā-/ asaṅk-
hy śatrudal! [...] aviśrānt/ ye aśamit pret, toṅkar māno dvār/ narak kārā ke?/ kyō? kyō? kyō?

35 kahātumhārā narak, rāj-rājeśvar?/ kahāprajā vah itar,/ vāhinī parābhūt-/ ve pratidvandvī aśarīrī?

36 narak cāhie mujhko!/ Inhē yantrṇā dūgā maī, jo pret-śatru ye mere tan mē/ ek phuraharī jagā rahe haī/ apne śoṣit kī aśarīr
chuan se!/ unhē narak!/ merā śāsan hai anullaṅghya!/ yantrṇā!/ narak cāhie mujhko!

37 *pad kī maryādā*. Stasik describes *maryādā* an important socio-cultural concept in India (2013: 238–240).

(Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 669). In this way Ajñeya hints at the material building, later described as a mythical hell, where The Terrible One judges and punishes:

Death's whip, without tenderness, all
calls out there, where unrestrained
flashing tongues of my flames
would lick them.³⁸ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 669)

The description of the types of torture the Terrible One may inflict is full of onomatopoeic expressions as in the legend, namely:

My stones
would grind them asunder, my crusher
would pulverise them:
in my red cauldrons, their limbs
bent would crack swallowed one by one!³⁹ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 670)

The executioner reminds the emperor of his promise not to enter the prison. However, the description of a “violent” (*tāṇḍav*) dance, which the prison's guard performs next (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 671), does not come from the tale itself. It refers to the dance of Śiva, a god known from Hindu mythology, and symbolises the cycle of time, destruction, and re-creation.⁴⁰ Thus, Ajñeya introduces another image of a mythical hell. In the culmination of this dance, a mendicant monk appears and searches for a way to enter the prison:

There would be a way somewhere –
a gate – a pass, an opening
through which the tender touch
can go and shake off this sadness!
Why is there so much pain here?⁴¹ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 671)

The episode of the monk passing through the gate to hell and a description of his torture is in line with the information contained in the legend. He wants to be tortured and prays for “light”, “endurance”, “radiant mercy”, and “salvation” (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 672). Subsequently, the monk defeats death, Priyadarshi is notified of the miracle, before breaking his word and entering hell. While seeing the monk meditating, he is astonished. At that very moment the Terrible One reminds him of his word and orders the emperor to be tortured:

You too are caught!
Hell [...]
For your enormous ego
behold the prize! Take it! Hell!⁴² (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 675).

38 yam kā koṛā sabko nirmam/ yahā hāk lāṭā hai - jahā aśam/ merī jvalā kī laplap jībhē unhē cāt lē.

39 mere patthar/ unko toṛ-toṛ kar pīsē,/ mere kolhū/ unhē per lē:/ lāl kaṛāhō mē mere, unke avyav/ caṭpaṭā uthē khā-khā maror!

40 Ajñeya also wrote an essay in which he explains the Indian concept of time and its cycles (Vatsyayan 1982).

41 kahī hogā mārg/- koī dvār-koī sandhi-koī randhr/ jisse sparś vatsal/ pahūc kar is duḥkh ko sahlā sake!/ kyō yahāitnī vyathā hai?

42 bandh hua hai tū bhī!/ narak/ [...] apnī sphit ahantā kā/ yah puraskār! le! narak!

The action turns into a war scene: the Terrible One attacks and the emperor approaches, the choir sings loudly, the tempo of the music increases. Eventually, the emperor falls in front of the monk, the executioner's hand freezes, and he departs (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 676). The episode of the clash between the emperor and his guard is treated differently in the legend, in that the executioner is sent to be tortured and beheaded. However, in the play, he is saved too. Then, the monk reveals both the truth, about the emperor's real hell, his exaggerated Self, and immortality:

What hell? Priyadarshi my Friend!
 Whose is the death-dealing whip? Where are the flames?
 Whose power falls? [...]
 but this life does not belong to you:
 the universal power, immortality which crosses everything
 is that
 whose beginning
 is there
 (understand it) – [...]
 where the source of your ego is!
 The power of Death you gave him yourself,
 you were its echo
 in the bonds of omnipresent cruelty!
 Hell!
 It is inside you! Exactly where
 in deeply poignant and limitless mercy
 its sin melts – and even hell melts.⁴³ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 669: 676–677)

The description of Priyadarshi's enlightenment follows, and the monk assures him about all-pervading mercy that lasts forever. The mantras to All-pervading Mercy, to the Buddha provide a closing framework⁴⁴ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 678). At the end of the play, the choir repeats the words about achieving salvation from hell, the disappearance of suffering, and redemption. Even the Terrible One calls upon the Emperor to choose "the source of redemption!" (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 679), while both of them, namely the emperor and his executioner, is astonished by the all-pervading love which has ended the war and the torture of hell:

The spot of sin is washed out! Oh!
 Here is the end of the war, the end of torture!
 The bonds are loosened! The all-encompassing love has sprung out
 The stream of light! This servant
 is freed! The sorrow has disappeared!⁴⁵ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 679)

43 kaisā narak? vats priyadarśi! / Kaśāghāt kiske? jvalāē kahā? / skhalan bhī kis śāsan kā? / devō ke priy, rāj-rāj! Maryādā/ hai, jo hotī nahī bhaṅg-/ śāsan bhī/ hai, jo nahīchūṭā; / par vah sattā nahītumhārī:/ śāsan sārvaḥaum, ātyantik anullaṅghya,/ vah jo hai-/ uskā bī uts/ vahī hai-/ (pahcāno to!) [...] jahā tumhāre ahaṅkār kā! / yam kī sattā/ svaym tumhī ne dī usko/ tum hue pratiśrut/ ek samān akarūṅā ke bandhan mē! / narak! tumhāre bhītar hai vah! Vahī/ jahā se niḥṣṛt pāramitā karūṅā mē/ uskā agh ghultā hai-svaym narak hī gal jātā hai.

44 pāramitā karūṅā ko naman karo! / us param buddh ko śaraṅ karo!

45 kalmaṣ-kalaṅk dhul gayā! Āh! / Yuddhānt yahā yāntrānt huā! / Khul gayā bandh! Karūṅā phūṭī! / Ālok jharā! Yah kiṅkar/ mukt huā! Gatā-śoka!

Conclusions

Ashoka's hell in Ajñeya's play is presented first as a reference to the historical war with Kalinga and the emperor's prison in Pataliputra, and next as the idea of hell as known from Buddhist legends. Whereas the reference of the first image is real, as the war was a historical fact, the second image has clear religious connotations and is an abstract idea. Both descriptions of hell correspond to each other as they focus on the cruelty done to the people, namely their suffering, torture, and death. The number of episodes from the legend of Ashoka's hell retold by Ajñeya in the plot of his play is limited to the most significant events, as summarised above. The writer transforms the Buddhist legend. The fight between the emperor and his executioner, which serves as the culmination of the plot at its end, thus displays the significant modification carried out by the writer to both versions of the legend, from the *Aśokāvadāna* and Chinese accounts. The climax of the legend of Ashoka's hell presents Ashoka being taught *dharma* by a monk (Deeg 2009: 118). The end of the play also differs greatly from that of the legend as the main antagonist, The Terrible One, is not beheaded as Girika is in the *Aśokāvadāna*. In *Uttar Priyadarsī* the guard of hell is saved from death. Although there are differences in the names of the main protagonists of Ajñeya's play and those of the legends, a more significant one is in the terms denoting the prison. In the Hindi, text this is called: "a fortified wall" (*parkoṭā*) (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 669), in Sanskrit *Aśokāvadāna*: *narakabhavana* "the building of hell" or *yantragṛh* "the house of machines." (Mukhopadhyaya: 1963: 47, 52) In contrast, the terms denoting "hell" are similar in the play and the legend: in Hindi *narak* (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 664), and in the Sanskrit text: *naraka* (Mukhopadhyaya 1963: 47). The same is true regarding the terms denoting "torture": in the play in Hindi this is *yam-yantr*, "Yama's machine" or *yantrṇā*, "torment, suffering" and "torture"⁴⁶ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 673–675), and in Sanskrit: *yantra* (Mukhopadyaya 1963: 52), meaning "an instrument for holding or restraining or fastening" (Monier-Williams 1899: 845).

Anxious to explain the reasons and manner of Ashoka's conversion to Buddhism, Ajñeya uses the image of the mythical hell from the *Aśokāvadāna* and presents it as the emperor's real prison, a part of the palace in Pataliputra. The writer is interested in the image of the real Ashoka before his conversion to Buddhism and at the very moment of it. After a period of conducting a policy of unscrupulous rule as a Hindu king, who cultivated strategies elaborated by Kauṭilya in *Arthāśāstra*⁴⁷ from the time of his grandfather Candragupta (321–297 BC)⁴⁸, conquest by the use of military force was rejected and replaced by one focused on taking care of emperor's subjects. Ajñeya while musing on Asoka's remorse after his cruel conquest of the kingdom of Kalinga and by depicting suffering in his prison hell, seems to send a message to rulers of independent India not to undertake violent war as means of integrating the newly obtained country. Thapar in her retrospective of Aśoka (2012b) argues that the image of the emperor whose greatness was rediscovered in the 20th century and subdued to political issues of making India independent needs to be liberated from the single aspect of asserting him as the Buddhist ruler or Hindu king. According to her, Ashoka should be seen both as a statesman who integrated and sustained an empire in a particular historical period and as a person committed to change society through the

46 See terms *yantr* and *yantrṇā* in McGregor (1993: 840).

47 Olivelle 2013.

48 Candragupta Maurya, the founder of Mauryan Empire, was known only from Buddhist and Jain legends until the 18th century, when William Jones discovered his correspondence with King Sandrocottos, the ruler of Palimbothra (Pataliputra) as described by Megasthenes, the Greek historian who visited India (Kosmin 2013: 98–101).

propagation of social ethics. (Thapar 2012b: 17–18). She poses a question if it is possible to draw ideas from him for contemporary India without distorting the historical context? The rule of Ashoka as a Buddhist king was the beginning of political centralisation and introducing a social order which did not permit too much individual liberty (Thapar 2012a). Historians stress that after accepting the Buddhist doctrine of proper conduct, Ashoka never neglected his duties as a king (Kulke, Rothermund 2010: 40). Ajñeya also underlines in his play that Priyadarshi's conversion did not affect his king's "propriety" and "honour" (*maryādā*) as the rejection of war and killing was not at odds with this. Thus, Ajñeya may be referring to both paradigms of Ashoka's rule: the ideal of kingship as depicted in Ashokan edicts, where the emperor is shown as integrating Buddhism into the state ideology, and also to the one known form *Asokāvadāna*, where the balance between the king and the monastic ideal of kingship is seen. Ajñeya's message could be read as the writer's universal appeal against violence. He underlines in the introduction to his drama the emperor's arrogance and his blindness until he got enlightenment in hell. What answers does Ajñeya give to the questions about the reasons for Ashoka's conversion and its ways asked at the beginning of his play? He seems to point to Priyadarshi's mental state tormented by "a riot of the dead", whom he wants to send to hell, as the reason for his transformation. Though edict RE XIII does not describe the war in detail, it does refer to its consequences – namely, the number of dead and captured people, as well as to the emperor's grief. The cruelty of this war probably inspired the writer to muse on the theme of Ashoka's hell. Ajñeya places his realistic descriptions of suffering on two narrative planes: namely, the real and the mythical. The first is referred to by the historical war, the ghosts of which torment the emperor's mind, and by his prison, termed as "the fortified wall" in the text of the play. The second plane is referred to as a mythical hell with its terrifying ruler. Descriptions of Ashoka's cruelty, of his prison and terror, are provided only in the legend, not in the edicts. On the contrary, a reference to Ashoka's grief is present only in his edicts. Deeg proves that "historical information evidently stemming from, or at least being confirmed by the edicts, was moulded into the legendary narrative as represented in the narrative about Asoka (*Asokāvadāna*), which itself then served as a model for Buddhist royal practice." (2012: 359) The passages describing the torture inflicted there correspond to the Buddhist idea of hell.⁴⁹ The results of the analysis prove that Ajñeya while drawing on Buddhist legend, searches for history and emphasises those elements which refer to cruelty so that the mythical hell resonates both with the prison and the hell of the war waged by the emperor. The torment of Ashoka's mind created by the phantoms of this war is its result. When *Uttar Priyadarsī* was presented in Switzerland it was received as an "anti-war" play (Kaushal, Sharma 2013: 125)⁵⁰. Moreover, the messages that Ajñeya seeks to reveal through his play about Ashoka are numerous. They cannot be easily understood without reference to both contexts, namely those of the emperor's history and the Buddhist tale. He is convinced of the value which the past may have for the present, to rephrase Thapar's words quoted in the beginning of the paper. The truth gained from the legends can become real, it can belong to history, as he proves not only in this play but in his other works. He shows that a realistic approach in Hindi drama is also possible in a traditional, poetical form resembling ancient tradition. Thus, he takes part in the debate about the shape of Hindi drama, which in the 1960s was at its peak. Most of all, Ajñeya invites the reader to immerse themselves in the story of Ashoka's hell

49 For analysis of the idea of hell in Buddhism see: Braarvig (2009).

50 In many of his earlier writings Ajñeya reveals his anti-war position and proves he possessed the attitudes of a humanist. Ajñeya's poem *Hirošimā* ("Hiroshima") describing the atomic attack on this city serves as one example (Ajñeya 1971: 20; Coppola 1973: 248), while his short stories on violence (*himśa*) also illustrate this (Ajñeya [1951] 1968; Damsteegt 1986).

as a metaphor for this dark part of human nature, which leads to cruel wars and the ruin of human beings. Priyadarshi's salvation from hell has to be read as liberation from one's exaggerated Self, which is only possible once it is recognised and renounced. The message of the necessity of going through hell to reject one's Self conforms not only with Buddhist ethics but also with Hindu and Christian thought, as Ajñeya suggests in the introduction to his work:

After the victory, first the sense of one's ego – and then after destroying the ego, a correct understanding of new values, opening the eyes to new horizons – isn't that a good and logical course of events and a natural psychological process? Without a witness after death, there is no immortality, without knowing hell, human redemption makes no sense – many have experienced that, from Naciketā of *Kaṭhopanīṣad* to Dante of *The Divine Comedy*.⁵¹ (Ajñeya [1967] 2010: 652)

Ajñeya explores the symbolic nature of Ashoka's hell as depicted in the legend and reveals its universal appeal. The stories of Priyadarshi, Naciketa and Dante symbolise the philosophical thought of the cultures and epochs to which they belong. Thus, while presenting the Indian variant of the motif of descending to hell the writer consciously refers to one of the oldest topoi of modern world literature.⁵² Tieken claims that in the RE XIII “a veritable theory of empire is unfolded”, along with three types of conquest, namely: by brute force, by military force, and by conversion (2002: 34). Finally, historians assume that if Ashoka had not converted to a policy of tolerance conforming with Buddhist ethics, “he would have had to fight many more bloody wars” to integrate his empire (Kulke, Rothermund 2010: 42). By reading the history of Emperor Ashoka from the legend, the story of his “arrogance and emerging from his blindness” in the context of modern wars, one learns something about the present. Ajñeya transforms the legend of Ashoka's hell so that it stresses the history, his cruelty depicted in the legend, was a fact during his imperial rule. By modifying the culmination and the ending of the legend in his play, Ajñeya adds a new perspective to the way it may be perceived. The writer proves that a mythical theme, motif, or protagonist can be productive elements of a modern literary work, and can be presented in a quite realistic way, which Ajñeya achieves in his play by providing psychological insight into the emperor's mind.

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51 vijay-lābh par pahle ahañkār-phir ahañkār ke dhvast hone par naye mūlya kā bodh, nayī dṛṣṭi kā unmeṣ-kyā yahī sahī tar-k-sañgati aur sahaj manovaigyānik kram nahī hai. mṛtyu se sāksātkār ke binā amaratv nahī miltā, narak kī pahcān ke binā narak-mukti kā koī arth nahī-kathopanīṣad ke naciketā se lekar divāinā kāmediyā ke dānte tak iske anek sāksī hai.

52 The topoi of a “descent into hell” is known in European theory of literature as *katabasis*.

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