

6

THE MAURYA EMPIRE (c. 324–187
BCE)



Map of Maurya Dynasty

The Maurya period is a remarkable period in the early history of Indian subcontinent. It not only marks the establishment of the **first sub-continental empire**, but also the development of innovative and comparatively stable governance strategies. Leaving Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and some parts of north-eastern India, the Mauryas ruled over the **whole of the sub-continent**. The sources of the Maurya period are more varied and considered more authentic than the earlier periods. For the

first time now, we have at our disposal a number of sources (literary sources like *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, *Indica* of Megasthenes, and the *Junagarh Inscription* of Rudradaman I, which attributes to the beginning of construction of a *Sudarshana lake* during Chandragupta's reign), and edicts issued by Ashoka that throw a clearer light on the history of this period. The other major literary sources for the period include Hemachandra's *Parishishtaparvan* (establishing Chandragupta's connections with Jainism); Vishakhadatta's *Mudrarakshasa* from the 5th century (a historical drama describing the clever machinations of Chanakya against Chandragupta's enemies); Dandin's *Dashakumaracharita*; Banabhatta's *Kadambari*; the *trinity of Buddhist texts* that give us an account of Chandragupta's life, namely, the *Mahavamsa*, *Milindapanho*, and *Mahabhashya*; the Buddhist *Dipavamsa*, *Ashokavadana*, *Divyavadana* (these three texts, as well as the *Mahavamsa*, give us an account of Ashoka); the *Vamsatthapakasini* (a 10th century commentary on the legend of Chanakya and Chandragupta); as well as Mamulanar's reference to the southward expansion of the Mauryas (according to this Tamil poet of the Sangam period, the Mauryas had an alliance with a southern power located in north Karnataka called the *Koshar*, and the Mauryas continuously interfered in the affairs and politics of south). These texts help us a lot in understanding about the life and administration of Mauryas. Among the textual sources, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Megasthenes's *Indica* hold special significance.

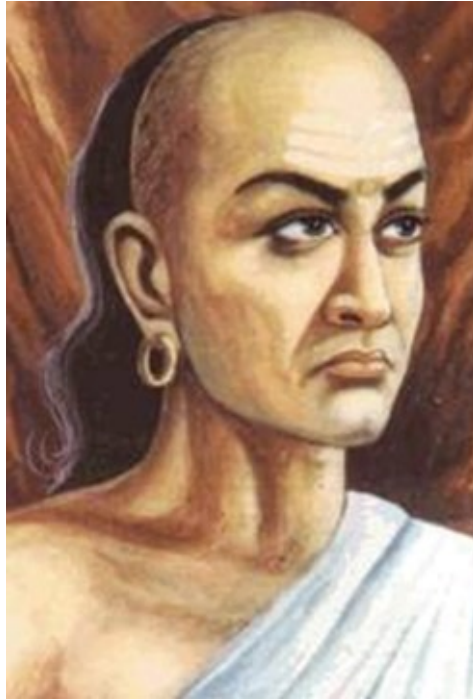


Kautilya's *Arthashastra*

It is considered one of the most sophisticated and detailed treatise to have ever been produced in India. The title *Arthashastra*, a Sanskrit word, literally means '*the science of material wellbeing*', though it is also accepted as '*the science of statecraft*'. It is rather interesting to note that according to the *Arthashastra*, *artha*, i.e., material well-being, is superior than both *dharma* (spiritual well-being) and *kama* (sensual pleasure). It consists of 15 books (*Adhikaranas*), out of which the first five deal with *tantra* (internal administration), and next eight with

avapa (interstate relations). The final two books deal with other miscellaneous topics. The *Arthashastra* summarises the political thoughts of Chandragupta Maurya's chief minister **Kautilya**, also known as **Chanakya** or **Vishnugupta**, who is often compared to the Italian Renaissance writer Niccolo **Machiavelli** (the author of *The Prince*). This book was lost for many centuries until a copy of it, written on palm leaves, was rediscovered in India in c.1905 CE by **R. Shamashastry**. This edition is dated to approximately c.250 CE, many centuries after the time of Kautilya, but it is generally accepted that the main ideas in this book are largely of Kautilya himself. The book contains detailed information about **specific topics** that are **relevant for rulers** who wish to **run an effective government**. **Diplomacy** and **war (including military tactics)** are the two points treated in most detail but the work also includes **recommendations on law, prisons, taxation, irrigation, agriculture, mining, fortifications, coinage, manufacturing, trade, administration, and spies**.

The ideas expressed by Kautilya in the *Arthashastra* are completely **practical** and **unsentimental**. Kautilya openly writes about **controversial topics** such as assassinations, when to kill family members, how to manage secret agents, when it is useful to violate treaties, and when to spy on ministers. However, he also writes about the **moral duty of the king** and stresses on **paternal despotism** as he summarises the duty of a ruler, saying, "*The happiness of the subjects is the happiness of the king; their welfare is his. His own pleasure is not his good but the pleasure of his subjects is his good*".



Chanakya



Megasthenes's *Indica*

Indica is an account left by a Greek ambassador, Megasthenes, sent by Seleucus Nikator to the court of Chandragupta Maurya who lived in the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra. This book has not survived, but its fragments are preserved in later Greek and Latin works of Diodorus (historian who describes Alexander's Indian campaign and provides a general description of India), Strabo (geographer whose books deal with geography of India and Persia), Pliny (Roman scholar who cites Megasthenes's observations), and Arrian (statesman and soldier who provides us with an account of Alexander's campaign and also of Admiral Nearchus's voyage back to Babylon). *Indica* describes the sub-continent in terms of its size and shape (India is a *quadrilateral-shaped country*, bound by the ocean on the southern and the eastern side), soil, climate, rivers, plants, animals (contains lengthy descriptions of elephants, horses, and monkeys as it appears that Greeks were specially captivated by Indian animals), produce, administration, society, legends, and folklore. The Greeks referred to the Indians' worship of Lord Krishna and addressed him as Dionysus and Herakles/Hercules. They

portrayed Indians as **honest** (since theft was rare) and having **great character** and **moral values**. Megasthenes was so impressed by the contentment and prosperity of the people that he made the sweeping remark that, *“famine has never visited India and that there has never been a general scarcity in the supply of nourishing food and even in times of war the Indians would never ravage the cultivated soil as was done by other nations but would fight their battles, away from agricultural fields allowing the tillers of the soil to carry on cultivation even when battles were raging.”*

The major faults of Megasthenes’ work were **mistakes in details**, the **uncritical acceptance of Indian folklore**, and a **tendency to idealise Indian culture by the standards of Greek philosophy**. For instance, Megasthenes, influenced by Herodotus’s classification of the Egyptian society into seven classes based on the professional criterion, mentioned existence of seven castes in India too (viz., philosophers, held in high esteem and consisting of *Brahmanas* and *Shramanas*; farmers, herdsmen, and hunters; artisans and traders; soldiers; overseers; and the king’s counsellors), which obviously was a division with reference to the professional pursuits of different sections of the society, and was rather contrary to the traditional fourfold division of the caste system then prevalent. However, Megasthenes did **identify two of the most important aspects** of the Indian caste system: **endogamy** and **hereditary occupation**. **Strabo** also wrongly states that Indians were ignorant of writing and smelting, and never drank wine except at sacrifices. Even with these faults, Megasthenes’ *Indica* along with Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* provides valuable insight on one of the most powerful and prominent dynasties of that time: the **Mauryan dynasty**.



THE MAURYAN DYNASTY

The **founder** of the Mauryan dynasty, **Chandragupta Maurya** (324/321 – 297 BCE) inherited a large army of the Nandas, which he used to conquer almost whole of north, the northwest, and a large part of the peninsular India. There is a **lot of ambiguity about the origins** and caste

of Maurya family, and they vary from text to text. The Buddhist texts such as the *Digha Nikaya*, *Mahavamsa*, and *Divyavadana*, speak of the Mauryas as belonging to a branch of the Kshatriya Moriya clan associated with the Shakyas, probably to give the family a higher status; but *Brahmanical sources* consider them Shudras and heretics, presumably because each king was strong patron to a heterodox sect. The family has also been believed to be associated with the Nandas, as according to the *Vishnu Purana*, Chandragupta Gupta was the eldest son of Maurya, son of the Nanda king Sarvarthasiddhi, by Mura, daughter of a hunter (*vrishala*).

Chandragupta Maurya (324/321 – 297 BCE)

- Mauryan dynasty **founded** by Chandragupta Maurya with the help of his mentor **Chanakya/Kautilya**.
- Chandragupta in all likelihood **first** established himself in **Punjab** and then **moved eastwards** until he gained control over the Magadha region. According to traditional belief, Chandragupta adopted this strategy on the basis of a **moral drawn** from an instance *where he witnessed a woman scolding her child for eating from the centre of a dish, because it is bound to be hotter than the sides*.
- Called **Sandrocottus** by the **Greek scholars** (identified by **William Jones**). Greek sources even suggest a **meeting** between **Chandragupta** and **Alexander** (who invaded north-west India during 327–326 BCE). They also account for the conflict between Chandragupta Maurya and **Seleucus Nikator** (who was one of the generals of Alexander, and after his death, and had succeeded in gaining control over most of the eastern Asiatic provinces). Chandragupta defeated him around 301 BCE and Seleucus was compelled to yield **Arachosia** (Qandahar area of south-east Afghanistan), **Gedrosia** (south Baluchistan), and **Parapomisadai** (area between Afghanistan and the Indian sub-continent, such as Kabul, Herat, Gandhara) to him in return for 500 elephants.

- Seleucus sent an ambassador to the Mauryan court, Megasthenes (who wrote the *Indica*).
- He was the chief architect of the Mauryan empire and built a vast empire, which included Bihar, Nepal, western and north- western India, and the Deccan.
- According to Jain texts and tradition, Chandragupta adopted Jainism and went to the hills of Shravana Belagola (near Mysore) with Bhadrabahu and committed Sallekhana (death by slow starvation).

Bindusara (297 – 273 BCE)

- Greek writers address him as Amitrochates (destroyer of foes), while the Mahabhasya refer to him as Amitraghat (killer of enemies). It is rather strange that Buddhist sources are silent on Bindusara. However, stories from the Ajivika sect do mention of a fortune-teller who prophesied to Bindusara about his son Ashoka's future greatness.
- Conquered 'the land between the two seas', i.e., the Arabian sea and the Bay of Bengal. The Tibetan monk Taranatha (who wrote a 17th century history of Indian Buddhism) states that one of Bindusara's great lords, Chanakya, destroyed the nobles and kings of 16 towns and made him master of all the territory between the eastern and western seas.
- Greek sources also mention of his diplomatic relations with western kings. According to Strabo, Antiochus (Syrian king) sent Deimachus as an ambassador to Bindusara's court. Similarly, Pliny mentions that King Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt sent one Dionysius as an ambassador to India.
- In Divyavadana, probably during his reign, there is a mention of his son Ashoka, who quelled a rebellion against wicked ministers at Taxila.
- Believed to have joined the Ajivika sect.
- Under his rule, almost the entire sub-continent (as far south as Karnataka) was under Mauryan suzerainty.

MAP - ASHOKA'S EMPIRE



Map of Ashoka's Empire

Ashoka (268 – 232 BCE)

- After Bindusara's death in 273 BCE, there was a **four-year succession conflict**. According to *Divyavadana*, Bindusara wanted his son **Susima** to succeed him, and Ashoka was the choice of Bindusara's ministers. Later, with the help of a minister named **Radhagupta**, and after killing 99 brothers, Ashoka finally acquired the Magadha throne and thus, after four years, came his formal consecration.
- He was appointed the **viceroys of Taxila and Ujjain** (both cities handled commercial activities) during the **reign of**

Bindusara.

- Regarded as one of the greatest kings of all times, and probably was the first ruler to maintain direct contact with his people through his inscriptions. The various names of the emperor include *Buddhashakya* and *Ashoka* (in the *Maski Edict*), *Dharmasoka* (*Sarnath inscription*), *Devanampiya* (meaning beloved of the gods), and *Piyadassi* (meaning of pleasing appearance), given in the *Sri Lankan Buddhist chronicles Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa*).
- According to the Buddhist text *Ashokavadana*, Ashoka's mother was daughter of a Brahmana of Champa named *Subhadraangi*. According to belief, Ashoka got his name (literally meaning 'without sorrow') from the fact that his birth resulted in the reunion of his mother and father, who were otherwise separated due to a palace intrigue. It is from her exclamation, "*I am now without sorrow*", that the child Ashoka got his name.
- Buddhist texts such as the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* provide a detailed account of his queens. According to legend, Ashoka had a love marriage with his wife *Mahadevi* (daughter of a merchant of Vidisha, who later became the mother of *Mahendra/Mahinda* and *Sanghamitra/Sanghamitta*, the celebrated children of Ashoka who helped in the propagation of the Buddhist religion). These two texts also mention the queens *Asandhimitta*, *Padmavati*, *Tissarakhita* (who tried to get the Bodhi tree cut), and *Karuvaki* (only queen to be mentioned in the *Queen's Edict*/Allahabad-Kosam pillar edict, where she is described as *the mother of prince Tivara*, the only son of Ashoka to be mentioned by name in inscriptions).
- His empire covered the whole territory from Hindukush to Bengal, and extended over Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and the whole of India including Kashmir and the valleys of Nepal (the first empire to do so), with the exception of a small area in the far south (which, according to rock edict

13, were inhabited by the Cholas and Pandyas, and according to rock edict 2, by the Keralaputras and Satiyaputras).

- His Hellenistic contemporaries were Antiochius II of Syria, Ptolemy II of Egypt, Antigonus of Macedonia, Magas of Cyrenaica (Libya), and Alexander of Epirus, as all of them are mentioned in the edicts of Ashoka. Ashoka exchanged missions, both diplomatic and other, with them. *“The conquest by Dharma has been won here, on the borders, and even six hundred yojanas (5,400-9,600 km) away, where the Greek king Antiochius rules, beyond there where the four kings named Ptolemy, Antigonus, Magas and Alexander rule, likewise in the south among the Cholas, the Pandyas, and as far as Tamraparni (Sri Lanka),”* says the 13th Rock Edict).
- Was a great proponent of Buddhism. According to tradition, and as mentioned in the Mahavamsa and Dipavamsa, he was converted to Buddhism by his nephew Nigrodha (who had become a monk at the tender age of 7). According to the Divyavadana, Samudra (a merchant - turned-monk) converted him. Buddhism for the first time went outside India during his reign. He sent his son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra to Ceylon (Sri Lanka).
- Appointed Dharma Mahamattas to propagate dharma among various social groups including women (in the 14th year of his reign).
- Organised the third Buddhist council at Pataliputra (in the 18th year of his reign), after which he sent Buddhist missionaries to Ceylon and Suvarnabhumi.
- In the course of his second Dharmayatra tour (in the 21st year of his reign), he visited Lumbini (the birth place of Buddha).
- Banned animal sacrifice, regulated the slaughter of animals for food, and established dharmashalas, hospitals, and sarais throughout his kingdom.

Brihadratha

The Maurya empire declined rapidly after Ashoka and the later kings had very short reigns. The empire became weak and fragmented, and the Mauryan dynasty came to an end when the last king, **Brihadratha**, was **killed by his military commander, Pushyamitra Sunga**, in 187 BCE.

Sunga Dynasty (187 BCE)



Ashokan Inscriptions and Ashoka's Dhamma

The history of Ashoka is reconstructed on the basis of his inscriptions. These inscriptions throw light not only on the reign of Ashoka, but also reveal his external and domestic policies, his views about **dhamma**, and the extent of his empire. As statements of his personal concerns, they are remarkable documents vividly describing the ambience of his time. There are total 33 inscriptions and are primarily classified into **Major Rock Edicts**, **Minor Rock Edicts**, **Separate Rock Edicts**, **Major Pillar Edicts**, and **Minor Pillar Edicts**. The edicts of the **earlier half of his reign** were **inscribed on conveniently located rock surfaces** and were widely distributed throughout the empire, especially in the areas of public settlements where people can easily read these edicts, and are thus referred to as the **Minor and Major Rock Edicts**. On the other hand, **pillar edicts** were mostly inscribed in the **latter parts of his reign** and instead of rocks, were on **well-polished sandstone monolithic pillars** (quarried from the sites of **Chunar**, near Varanasi), **each surmounted** with a **finely sculpted animal capital** involving great technological expertise in cutting and engraving, and were largely confined to the Ganges plain (since they were transported by river). In his inscriptions, **Brahmi**, **Kharosthi**, **Prakrit**, **Aramaic**, and **Greek** languages (**deciphered** by **James Prinsep** in c.1837 CE) have been used. There is interestingly **no reference to the teachings of the Buddha** in the **Greek and Aramaic versions** (mostly found around the north-western borders such as the

Shar-i-Kuna Greek-Aramaic Inscription). Equally fascinating is the fact that **some concepts** in these edicts are drawn from the **philosophical discourses of that language**. For instance, *the edicts in Aramaic are better understood if read in the context of some Zoroastrian concepts*. Also, it is true that **Ashoka's inscriptions do not contain certain key ideas associated with the Buddha's teaching**, such as the Eight-Fold Path, the Four Noble Truths, and the goal of *Nibbana*. Nevertheless, there is definite Buddhist core ideology in his dhamma-focussed inscriptions.

Most of the Ashoka's inscriptions are about *dhamma* (Prakrit form of dharma, literally meaning the **universal law** or **righteousness** or **social and religious order**), and it was clearly inspired by the Buddhist *upasaka dhamma* (i.e., the Buddha's teaching for the laity), but it was not a mirror image of it. Ashoka's *dhamma* was a set of teachings that could not be identified with just narrow sectarian belief, rather **it encompassed a social and intellectual code of ethics** influencing many aspects of social life, and even a lot more than that. It emphasised on **non-violence**, and **mutual respect** and **understanding** between people of different sects and beliefs. Ashoka did not see *dhamma* as piety, resulting from good deeds that were inspired by formal religious beliefs, but as **conformity to a social ethic**. His *dhamma* was aimed at creating an attitude of mind having **primacy of ethical behaviour** and the recognition of the **dignity of human life**. He repeatedly asked *the people to extend respect, consideration, compassion, and tolerance towards slaves and servants, respect for teachers, obedience to parents, generosity towards friends and relatives, regard and donations to Brahmanas and Shramanas, a concern for all living beings, and an abstention from destroying life*. His policy of *dhamma* included the state's concern for the welfare of its people. It was a code of conduct or ideal social behaviour common to all religions of the world, which he appealed to his subjects to follow. A closer look at Ashokan edicts illustrates that basic attributes of *dhamma* included **compassion** (*daya*), charity (**dana**), truthfulness, purity, and gentleness.

Fourteen Major Rock Edicts and Their Corresponding Messages

First Edict: Declared **prohibition of animal sacrifice**

Second Edict: Medical treatment of human and animals, planting beneficial **medicinal herbs** and roots, fruits, and the digging of wells

Third Edict: Mentions *Pradeshikas*, *Rajukas*, and *Yuktas* and their need for going on **tours of inspection** every five years as part of their other duties, preaching *dhamma*, and also adopting liberal attitude towards *Brahmanas* and *Shramanas*

Four Edict: *Bheri Ghosha* (**war drum**) replaced by *Dhamma Ghosha* and King Ashoka attached greatest value to this duty

Fifth Edict: Appointment of *Dhamma Mahamattas*, a special cadre of officials entrusted to spread dhamma within the kingdom

Sixth Edict: Mantri parishad and officers like *Pulisani* and *Pativedakas* (reporters)

Seventh Edict: Religious **tolerance** amongst all sects and welfare measures for public not only in his own kingdom but also in the neighbouring kingdoms of Cholas, Pandyas, and that of Antiochus in the north-west.

Eighth Edict: Royal pleasure tours (*Vihara-yatras*) replaced by *dhamma* tours (*dhamma-yatras*). Ashoka himself went to Sambodhi at Bodhgaya.

Ninth Edict: Criticism of the uselessness of various ceremonies, instead lays stress on dhamma and **moral conduct**

Tenth Edict: *King desires no more fame or glory*

Eleventh Edict: Announces that the **gift of dhamma being the best gift of all gifts** and the Policy of *Dhamma* is the best policy to follow. *Dhamma* included giving respect to elders, and good behaviour towards slaves.

Twelfth Edict: Mention of *Ithijika Mahamatta* (**mahamattas in charge of women's welfare**) and appeals for not only tolerance amongst sects, but also for people to honour and understand the dhamma of others

Thirteenth Edict: The **Kalinga war (261 BCE)**, occurred in the ninth year after Ashoka's consecration) changed his attitude and Ashoka, who was the worshipper of Shiva, turned towards Buddhism. *Digvijay* was

replaced by *Dhamma Vijay*, the sword was replaced by *dhamma*, the war drum (*Bheri Ghosha*) became law (*Dhamma Ghosha*). His *dhamma* contained the essence (good qualities) of all the religions of the world. The king considered victory by *dhamma* to be the foremost victory; mention of victory by *dhamma* on his Hellenistic neighbours like Antiochus, and others like the Cholas and Pandyas. But, in this rock edict itself, he sternly warns the forest tribes against any intransigence.

Fourteenth Edict: Purpose of rock edicts

Pillar Edicts and their Corresponding Messages

The majestic free-standing Ashokan pillars probably signify the axis of the world (*axis mundi*) that separated heaven and earth. Pillar edicts have been found at *Lauriya-Araraj*, *Lauriya Nandangarh*, *Rampurva*, *Nigali Sagar*, *Sarnath*, *Topra*, and *Meerut*. It is rather interesting to note that **two pillars**, one from *Topra* and the other from *Meerut*, were **shifted to Delhi** by *Feroz Shah Tughlaq*. There are **pillars without inscriptions** such as the **bull capital pillar** at *Rampurva*, the pillar with the **lion capital** at *Vaishali*, and the **Kolam pillar**, which is also without a capital. The Ashokan pillars have the following **features**:



Ashokan pillar at Vaishali

- a. Mostly, the pillars are **similar in form** and **dimensions**, and are **made of sandstone** quarried from Chunar.
- b. Mostly **monoliths** (i.e., carved out of a single piece of stone) and have a **lustrous, polished surface**
- c. **Do not have a base**, and the plain, smooth cylindrical shaft tapers slightly upwards to a height of 12-14m. A cylindrical bolt joins the top of the shaft to the capital, and **have a bell capital** (a stone carved in the shape of an inverted lotus).
- d. On top of bell capital is a **platform (abacus)** which is intended to support the crowned animal. The abacus is square and plain

in earlier pillars, and circular and curved in later ones. All the parts of the pillars are **carved on all sides**, i.e., in the round, probably meant to be viewed from all around.

The motifs associated with the Ashokan pillars have a **rich and varied symbolism** in resonance with many prevailing Indian religious traditions. For instance, the most found motifs were of **lotus** (symbolised, **purity** and **fecundity** in Indian tradition), **lion** (is a **solar symbol** and **represents the Buddha** too, as he is referred to as **Sakya-simha**, i.e., lion among the Sakyas), **bull** (symbol of **fertility**), **elephant** (relevant in Buddhism as according to Buddhist tradition, Buddha entered his mother's womb in the form of a white elephant), **spoked wheel** (represents **dharmachakra**, i.e., the wheel of dharma and also associated with sovereignty), and **horse** (symbolises **departure of Siddhartha** from his home). Some of the important pillar edicts feature the following:



Bull Capital of Rampura

First Pillar Edict: Social code

Second Pillar Edict: Describes *dharmma* as consisting of **least amount of sin**, performing virtuous deeds, having compassion, purity, and

truthfulness

Third Pillar Edict: Soul and sin Fourth Pillar Edict: *Rajukas*

Fifth Pillar Edict: Popularly known as the Delhi-Topra pillar edict, it features prohibitions regarding animal killing.



Delhi Topra Pillar

Sixth Pillar Edict: Welfare of people

Seventh Pillar Edict: *Dhamma Mahamattas*

Other Relevant Inscriptions and Important Edicts

1. Allahabad – Kosam/Queen's Edict / Kausambi or Schism Edict
 - Ashoka warns members of the *Sangha* against causing division in the ranks
 - Samudragupta's inscription is on this edict itself
 - Jahangir was probably responsible for its removal to the fort at Allahabad
2. Girnar Rock Inscription of Rudradaman (Kathiawar)
 - Mentions the Sudarshan Lake constructed by Pushyagupta, a *rashtriya* (means provincial governor) of Saurashtra during Chandragupta Maurya's reign
3. Kandahar Inscription
 - Bilingual Greek, Aramaic inscription
4. Nigali Sagar Inscription (Nepal)
 - To record the first enlargement of stupa (14 years after his consecration) and later Ashoka's visit to the site (20 years after his consecration)
5. Rummindei Inscription(Nepal)
 - To commemorate the birthplace of the Buddha, Ashoka visited Lumbini, worshipped here and gave tax concessions to the villagers. It records that *the village of Lumbini was exempted from bali and was to pay only one-eighth of bhaga.*



Rummindei Pillar

6. **Sannati Inscription** (Karnataka)
 - Site of all 14 Major Rock Edicts as well as two separate Kalinga edicts.
7. **Kalinga Edict** (Bhauri and Jaugada): Mentions “*All men are my children*”
8. **Saugaura Copper Plate Inscription** and Mahasthan: Inscription of **Chandragupta Maurya**; mentions **relief measures adopted during famine in Magadha**
11. **Minor Rock Edict 1**: Indicates that **Ashoka turned towards Buddhism gradually** (nearly after 2.5 years in power), and not suddenly
12. **Minor Rock Edict 3**: Ashoka greets the *Sangha*, professes his **deep faith** in the Buddha, *dhamma*, and *Sangha* and recommends six Buddhist texts for monks, nuns, and the general laity
13. Inscriptions at **Shahbazgarhi** and **Mansehra** written in **Kharosthi** script
14. **Brahmagiri** - Minor Rock Edicts I and II talk about **local administration**



Ashoka's Legacy

Ashoka was not only a great missionary ruler in the history of ancient India, but of the world too. He has great and path-breaking innovative achievements to his credit, such as:

- a. **Political unification** of the country: He not only added Kalinga to Mauryan dynasty but also bound the whole country together by one *dhamma*, one language, and practically one script of Brahmi (which is used in most of his inscriptions).



Kanaganahalli Stone Portrait of Ashoka

- b. Spread of tolerance and respect: He **adopted** and **preached tolerance** in not only the religious sphere (did not try to force his Buddhist faith on his subjects and made **gifts to non-Buddhist sects as well**, such as, donating **Barbara caves to Ajivika** ascetics), but in the case of scripts (other than Brahmi, he respected other scripts like Kharosthi, Aramaic, and Greek), and languages (Greek, Prakrit, and Sanskrit) too.
- c. Promotion of cultural contacts: He not only brought innovative

administrative changes, but also promoted cultural contacts between Indian states, and between India and the outer world too. It would not be an exaggeration if Ashoka is considered the first global cultural ambassador of India.

- d. Policy of peace and non-aggression: Ashoka is famous in history for his policy of peace, non-conquest, and non-aggression. In this sense, he was much ahead of his time and generation.



Mauryan Administration

The Maurya period was marked by innovative administrative changes and an elaborate administration. It is generally believed that the Mauryas had a vast and highly centralised bureaucratic rule with king as the fountainhead of all powers; though it is claimed that Mauryan kings (especially Ashoka) claimed paternal despotism rather than divine rule. Ashoka's empire was probably divided into provinces with a viceroy in each province. In the *Arthashastra*, Kautilya notes down the concept of *saptanga rajya* according to which, a state comprises seven inter-related and interlocked *angas* or *prakritis* (elements):

1. **Svamin (king)**: Soul of all the seven elements. According to Kautilya, the king was the *Dharmapravakta* (promulgator of social orders as he issued *Rajasasana*, i.e., royal rescripts and maintained *porana pakiti*, i.e., ancient rules and customs). Even though in his daily affairs he was assisted by a council of ministers, yet the king himself took all final decisions regarding revenue, law and order, war, or any other matter related to administration. He was expected to be agile and accessible to his officials at all times. According to Megasthenes, *Chandragupta was a very hard-working official. He remained in court whole day, did not sleep at day time and even when he would have his body massaged or his hair combed and dressed, he would attend to public business and gave audience to his ambassadors.* In one of his rock edicts, Ashoka had declared that even common people could meet him

any time. He also declared that *all his subjects were like his children and he desired their happiness in this and the other world*. The *Arthashastra* also asserts that the king should maintain helpless children, old people, childless women, and other destitute and vulnerable people. The king also tried to ensure people's welfare by planting trees along roads, digging wells, and providing medical care for both men and animals. In Mauryan times, the king also had to exercise great vigilance to safeguard his life and position. *Arthashastra* contains a great detail about the multiple secret emergency exits and about different examination techniques employed to check all the things going in and out of the palace complex. Interestingly, there is also mention of **female personal bodyguards** of the king, who were skilled in archery. Kautilya also mentions the dangers of assassination and thus suggests ways to guard the king against poison, fire, and snakes; and to muster an effective ring of spies who can sniff out even the slightest whiff of sedition (such as **sanstha** or **stationary spies** who were posted permanently at a particular region and **sanchara** or **wandering spies** who wandered from place to place for collecting secret information). Chandragupta maintained a body of spies called **Overseers** (the **Episcopoi** of the Diodorus or **Ephori** of Strabo and Arrian) who kept watch on events going on throughout the country and regularly reported to the King. Strabo says that the **Ephori** were appointed from the most faithful persons. There is also mention of **Pativedakas** and **Pulisani** who functioned as special reporters of the king and kept him informed of public opinion.

2. **Amatya** (all **high officials, counsellors, and executive heads of departments/ ministers**): The king appointed a council of ministers to assist him in day-to-day administration called **Mantriparishad** (a larger body as compared to the **Mantraparishad**, which was a small consultative body of mantris). According to Megasthenes and later Greek writers like Diodorus, Strabo, Arrian, etc., the *Mantriparishad* was very influential. Besides advising the king in matters of

administration, it exercised great influence in the appointment of governors, viceroys, deputy governors, treasurers, generals, admirals, judges, chief magistrates, and other high officials.

The meeting of the *Mantriparishad* was also attended by the *Maha-Mantrins* or the high ministers. This is borne out by the fact that while the *Mantrins* received 48,000 panas as salary per annum, the members of the *Mantriparishad* received only 12,000 panas per annum.

There were also bodies of *Nikayas* (trained officials) who looked after the ordinary affairs of the realm. The *Arthashastra* refers to the highest functionaries at the centre as the eighteen *Tirthas*, the chief among them were the *Mantrin* (chief minister), *Purohita* (high priest), *Yuvaraja* (heir-apparent), and *Senapati* (commander-in-chief). There were various other officials who were in charge of important portfolios. These officials were known as *Amatyas* (who filled the highest administrative and judicial appointments), *Mahamattas*, and *Adhyakshas*. The *Adhyakshas* (or superintendents, whom Megasthenes called the *Astynomoi*, the *magistrates* of Strabo) were high-ranking officials next to the *Tirthas*, concerned mostly with economic functions and some military duties. The *Arthashastra* provides a list of 27 *Adhyakshas* who were responsible for running various economic departments like agriculture, mining, weaving, trade, etc. For instance, the magistrates who looked after towns and cities were called *Nagaradhyaksha*, and those looking after the military were called *Baladhyakshas*. Quite strikingly, there were enormous gaps in terms of salary between the highest and lowest category of government officers. For instance, the ratio of the clerk's/soldier's salary to that of the chief minister/commander of the army works out at 1:96.

Among all the executive officials, *Samahartri* (chief collector of revenue) was the most important and his responsibility involved maintaining accounts and collection of taxes from all types of sources. Most of the superintendents mentioned above functioned on his orders. There was also the office of *Samnidhatri* (treasurer) who was also in charge of the royal stores, *akshapatala* (records-cum-audit office), and *dauvarika* (chief of the palace attendants). It is rather interesting to note that Kautilya laid down certain specific tests to determine the suitability

of appointment of persons as different *Amatyas*, and only those whose character had been tested under all kinds of allurements and not just one kind, were to be promoted to still higher position of advisers to the king. For instance, in case that the *Amatyas* in charge of civil and criminal justice might be sufficiently religious-minded to adjudicate cases impartially, they had to be purified by religious tests (*Dharmopadhasuddha*). Likewise, those to be appointed as chancellor of the exchequer (Samaharta) had to be purified by a money test (*Arthopadhasuddha*); those appointed to the pleasure gardens, had to be purified by a love test (*Kamopadhasuddha*); and those who had to be employed in work which needed bold and immediate steps had to be purified by a fear test (*Bhayopadhasuddha*).

3. *Janapada* (territory and population): Apart from Magadha with its capital at Pataliputra, the Mauryan Empire was divided into four other provinces, with capitals at Taxila (north-western India), Suvarnagiri (southern India), Tosali (eastern India), and Ujjain (western India). During Ashoka's reign, a fifth province of Kalinga was added. The head of the provincial administration was viceroy, who was in charge of law and order, and collection of taxes for the centre. He was generally a prince from the royal family (*kumara or aryaputra*) and was assisted by *Mahamattas* and a council of ministers. Besides imperial provinces, there were a number of territories that enjoyed some measure of autonomy.

Sate	Capital
Uttarapatha	Taxila
Dakshinapatha	Suvarnagiri
Eastern India	Tosali
Avantiratha	Ujjain
Kalinga	Tasali/Dhauri

The provinces were further divided into divisions headed by *Pradeshikas*, who had no advisory council. Divisions were divided into districts under officials called *Rajukas* (derived from *rajju*, meaning

rope, and probably referring to the measurement of land using ropes). He was assisted by *Yuktas* (clerks) in accounting, secretarial, and other miscellaneous works. Districts were in turn divided into groups of 5 or 10 villages headed by *Sthanikas* (who collected taxes), and were assisted by *Gopas* (who maintained proper records and accounts). The lowest administrative unit was the village, headed by *Gramini/Gramika* on the consultation of *Grama-vridddhas* (village elders). The Maurya administration was thus structurally in the nature of a pyramid with the Gramini at the bottom and the king at the top. However, it is not sure whether the entire Indian sub-continent had similar type of administration. It seems that while the central province of Magadha was under strict supervision of the king, other far-flung areas might have witnessed varied degree of administrative control.

Sthaniya Drona Mukha Kharvatika Samgrahana

Administrative unit of 800 villages → 400 villages → 200 villages → 10 villages

The municipal administration of Pataliputra, the capital city of Mauryas, was of a unique character. The city administration of Pataliputra, according to Megasthenes and corroborated by *Arthashastra*, was conducted by six committees of five members each. Each committee was assigned different subjects such as industry, foreigners, birth and death registration, trade and market regulations, and tax collection to look after.

Committee/Board	Function
1) Industry	This committee had to look after production of commodities, keep watch on the quality of raw materials used, decide the fair value of the articles produced and stamp the finished articles as evidence of their suitability to be marketed.
2) Foreigners	Both Strabo and Diodorus state that the Mauryan Government took special care of the foreigners. The duty of this board was to see that no foreigner was wronged. The board used to send

	<p>physicians to attend and take care of any foreigner who was not keeping well, and if he died they buried him and delivered the property had he left behind to his family.</p>
3) Vital statistics (birth and death registration)	<p>This Board would enquire when and how deaths occurred and register every birth and death with a view of not only levying a tax, but also in order that birth and deaths among both high and low may not escape the cognizance of the government.</p>
4) Trade, commerce and market regulations	<p>It kept watch over the weights and measures and made sure that commodities were sold out before their quality deteriorated. It also ensured that seasonal products were sold by public notice and no one was allowed to deal in more than one commodity (however, one could do so by paying double or three times the tax according to the number of commodities dealt with). Kautilya even suggested that the dues realised in the form of grain should be kept as buffer stock to be used in time of food shortage.</p>
5) Manufactured articles	<p>The fifth Board supervised that public notice was given for the sale of manufactured articles. This board kept strict watch so that newly manufactured articles were not mixed or piled with the old stock.</p>
6) Tax collection	<p>The sixth Board was in charge of collecting one-tenth of the prices of the articles or produce sold, as tax. Any fraud in payment of this tax was punishable with death penalty.</p>

4. **Durga** (Fortified capital): The Mauryans maintained a huge army. According to Greek writer Justin, *Chandragupta had 6,00,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9,000 elephants, and 8,000 chariots*. Although, it seems to be an exaggerated figure, but

the possession of a large army by the Mauryas cannot be doubted. Higher officers called *Anta-Mahamattas* was responsible for the security of frontier forts. Kautilya gave detailed directions for the construction of the main fort in the capital city. He recommends that troops should be stationed along the approaches to the fort and the fort walls should be surrounded by not one but three moats filled with lotuses and crocodiles. He also suggests that the fort should be provided with plenty of supplies to tide over sieges and should have numerous secret escape routes. Kautilya strongly approves of a standing army, which was supposed to be recruited from all four *varnas*, adequately trained and maintained by the state. *Senapati* and *Nayaks* were important military officers under whom there were several *Adhyakshas*/superintendents of different wings and units of the army. Megasthenes reports that the administration of different branches of the army was carried through a War Office comprising 30 members, obviously experts in different branches of military art and science. It was divided into six Boards of five members each:

- (i) The Board of Admiralty: In charge of the navy, though interestingly Kautilya does not mention the navy.
- (ii) The Board of Infantry: Headed by *Padadhyaksha*
- (iii) The Board of Cavalry: Headed by *Asvadhyaksha*
- (iv) The Board of War Chariots: Headed by *Rathadhyaksha*
- (v) The Board of War Elephants: Headed by *Hastyadhyaksha*
- (vi) The Board of Transport and Supervision of Equipment

In addition to these, there is also mention of periodic levies of troops such as *Maula* (hereditary warriors), *Bhartiaks* (mercenaries), and forest tribe soldiers, and allies (furnished by friends).

5. *Kosha* (Treasury): As discussed above, the Mauryas maintained a huge standing army and employed a large number of state officials. Since these soldiers and officials were paid in cash, the state taxes were not considered sufficient to meet all the needs of the state. Hence it had to undertake and regulate

numerous economic activities to generate more and more resources. Taxes were levied in both cash and kind. The mainstay of economy in this period was agriculture (animal husbandry and trade were other main occupations), and the land revenue was the main source of income. Principal crops were various varieties of rice, barley, millet, wheat, sugarcane, and most of the pulses, peas, and oilseeds. The notion of private property of Kshetra (land which could be sold under certain regulations) had emerged and got established during this time. The kshetrika (land-owner) was distinguished from the upasava (tenant). In case of land disputes where neither side could prove its claim, the property went to the king. Peasants paid one-sixth of produce as bhaga and extra tax bali as tribute. The bali (land tax or tax on the area of land) was the main item of revenue and was levied at the rate of one-sixth of the produce. Peasants had to pay many other taxes like Pindakara (assessed on groups of villages), Hiranya (paid only in cash), Kara (levied on fruits and flower gardens), etc., but the exact nature of all of them is still not very clear. Land tax was collected by a class of officials called Agranomoi (by Megasthenes).

The importance of irrigation was fully realised and peasants had to pay more tax on irrigated land known as udaka-bhaga (water rate, and generally levied at one-fifth to one-third of the produce). Megasthenes refers to various other classes of officials who superintended the rivers, measured the land, and inspected the sluices by which water is let out from the main canals into their branches so that everyone may have an equal supply of it. In order to augment the resource base, the Mauryan state founded new agricultural settlements to bring virgin land under cultivation (Shunyanivesha). People from overpopulated areas, slaves, and prisoners of war were brought to these new settlements to work on the fields. These villages belonged to the king and were looked after by government officials called Sitadhyaksha (Superintendent of agriculture). Share-cropping existed on both state-owned and privately owned land. Kautilya refers to different kinds of share-croppers

working on the state-owned land such as the *Ardhasitikas* (kept half of the produce) and the *Svaviryopajivins* (kept one-fourth or one-fifth of the produce). It should be noted that there is no reference in any text of taking away the land of the farmers in case of non-payment of taxes. Kautilya also mentions certain emergency taxes (*Pranaya*) or additional levies that the state could impose if the treasury got depleted. These included a tax on farmers (ranging from one-fourth to one-third of the produce depending on the quality of their land), an additional levy on the traders, and taxes on the income of actors, singers, and prostitutes.

Trade and urban economy received great impetus under the Mauryas and influenced almost all parts of the empire. The main centres of textile manufacturing were *Varanasi*, *Mathura*, *Bengal*, *Gandhara*, and *Ujjain*. The state also functioned as entrepreneur and state-run textile workshops were placed under *Sutradhyaksha*, and chariot workshops under a *Rathadhyaksha*. Mining and metallurgy was another important economic activity and the mine officer was called *Akaradhyaksha*. Kautilya describes forests, pastures, and mines as state property. Trade was conducted through land and river routes. Pataliputra was also connected through various trade routes with all parts of the subcontinent. The main centre of trade in the northwest was Taxila, which was further connected with central Asian markets. *Tamralipti* (Tamluk in West Bengal) in the east and *Broach in the west* were important seaports. Craft activities were also a major source of revenue to the state. Artisans living in towns had to pay taxes either in cash or kind or work free for the king (*visthi*, i.e., forced labour). Arthashastra mentions wage labour (*karamakara*), bonded labour and slave labour (*dasas* and *ahitakas*, i.e., those pledged to creditors when contracting a debt). Traders and artisans were organised in corporate associations called *shrenis* or *guilds* or *puga* to protect their rights. The guilds were headed by *Jesthaka*. The Mauryas were responsible for introduction of iron on a large scale in different parts of the sub-continent. They maintained a monopoly over the production of iron, which was in great demand by the army, industry, and agriculture. It was done through the official called *Loha-adyaksha*. Urban taxes included *Shulka* (duties on imported and exported goods) and excise duties on local manufactures.

Certain important officials were:

- a. *Panyadhyaksha* (Officer in charge of trade, price fixation, and sale of goods produced by state-run manufacturing units)
- b. *Sansthadhyaksha* (Superintendent of markets)
- c. *Rupadarshaka* (Inspector of coins)
- d. *Pautavadhyaksha* (In charge of standardised weights and measures)

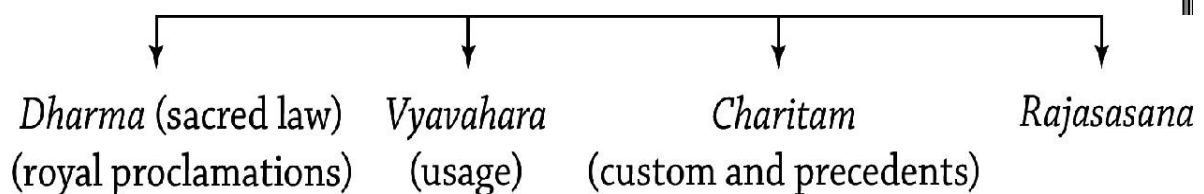
A considerable part of the revenue was spent for the maintenance of the army, war horses, war elephants, and war chariots. The artisans also received maintenance from the royal exchequer. Herdsmen were paid grains from the royal granary for their labour for clearing the land of wild beasts and fowls. The Philosophers, i.e., the *Brahmanas* and the *Shramanas*, received **unused land as royal gifts** but such land could not be sold or mortgaged by the beneficiaries. For instance, Pillar Edict 3 refers to the gifts of mango groves, gardens, and alms houses by queen Karuvaki, while **inscriptions** in the **Barabar** and **Nagarjuni hills** account for the **gift of caves** to **Ajivika ascetics** by **king Ashoka** and his successor **Dasaratha**. The children of *Brahmanas* and handicapped people were exempted from paying taxes. Construction of roads, buildings, forts, repairs of the existing constructions, etc. claimed a good part of the expenditure during the rule of Chandragupta. There have been no evidence of any banking system but **usury** (lending of money at high interest rate) is often mentioned, though **ironically**, Megasthenes claimed that Mauryans did not know about money lending. **Punch-marked silver coins** which carried the **symbol** of **peacock**, **hill**, and **regent** formed the imperial currency of the Mauryans. Thus, there was not only extensive state participation in the economy, but the state also exercised great regulation and control over the economy.

6. *Danda/Bala* (Justice or force): As far as judicial administration is concerned, the **king** was the supreme authority. He personally **adjudicated** the cases that came before him. Judging of cases consumed a great part of his time in the court. He would never keep his petitioners waiting. He obviously followed the exhortations of Kautilya, his minister, who

observed in his Arthashastra that “when in the court, he (the king) shall never cause his petitioners to wait at the door, for when a king makes himself inaccessible to the people and entrusts his work to his immediate officers, he may be sure to engender confusion in business, and to cause thereby public disaffection, and himself a prey to his enemies.”

Judges were called *Dharmasthas* (though Ashokan inscriptions mention city *Mahamattas* who were also given *judicial functions*), and *Pradeshtris* were the officers responsible for the *suppression of criminals*. Various civil as well as criminal courts functioned at the local level right from village to province. It seems most of the cases were disposed off at the village level by village elders. Police headquarters were present in all principal centres and *Bandhanagara* meant *proper jail* while *Charka* refers to *police lock up*. From the classical sources, we can establish that the judges also decided with utmost care the cases in which foreigners were concerned, and would come down sharply on those who took unfair advantage of them. *Punishments* to persons held guilty by the court were very *severe*. Decapitation, amputation of limbs, fines, and forfeitures were the different types of punishment prevalent at that time. The nature of the *punishment depended* on the *nature, gravity, circumstances*, and also on the *varna of the offender and the plaintiff*. Generally, the *dvija*/higher varnas were given *lighter punishment* than the lower ones, though in Pillar Edict 4 Ashoka claims that he had introduced *samata* (fairness) in judicial procedures. The same edict refers to a three-day respite for those who were condemned to death to appeal the decision, which indicates that death penalty was present even during Ashoka’s time.

Four sources of law are mentioned by Kautilya



7. *Mitra* (ally): From the point of the *Vijigishu* (the would-be-conqueror) Kautilya discusses the *inter-state policy* and takes

into account all possible circumstances. He lists *Shad-gunya* (six policies) that the king should follow in these circumstances:

- a. Policy of *Sandhi* (peace treaty): If one is *weaker* than the enemy
- b. Policy of *Vigraha* (hostility): If one is *stronger* than the enemy
- c. Policy of *Asana* (keeping quiet): If one's power is *equal* to that of the enemy
- d. Policy of *Yana* (marching on a military expedition): If one is *much stronger* than the enemy
- e. Policy of *Samshraya* (seeking shelter with another king or in a fort): If one is *very weak*
- f. Double policy of *Dvaidhibhava* (sandhi with one king and vigraha with another): If one can *fight the enemy with the help of an ally*.

The Mauryas had great diplomatic relations with various Hellenistic kingdoms and even South Asian countries. Probably they had a full-fledged *department of foreign affairs* for the same. In Arthashastra, there is mention of certain diplomatic posts of:

- a. *Nisriharthaduta* → Full-fledged Ambassador
↓
- b. *Parimitarthaduta* → could not go beyond his instruction in negotiation
↓
- c. *Sasanharaduta* → Special Messenger



The Mauryan Society

As far as the society is concerned, despite the challenge posed by Buddhism and Jainism, the *varna* system *continued to exist* and *Brahmanas* and *Kshatriyas* *dominated the social hierarchy*. However, as a result of greater trade and commerce, there was *improvement* in the

social status of Vaishyas or trading communities and Shudras. Now Shudras could be involved in the agricultural and artisanal activities. This period also saw increase in the number of untouchables, i.e., Chandalas and Shvapakas (dog breeders), also called Antavasayin (literally meaning living at the end). Surprisingly, there is no mention of either Varna or Sati in the Ashokan edicts.

Even though Megasthenes lauds the Indian society for not having any slaves, yet ironically, the fact is that slavery existed in India at that time. This is borne out by the Arthashastra which says that “no Arya or freeman could be reduced to slavery”. Reference to dasas (the slaves) in Ashokan inscriptions also bear testimony to the existence of the institution of slavery in Mauryan India. Ashokan edicts, while discussing dhamma, demands courteous behaviour towards dasas and bhatakas/bhritakas (servants). Kautilya lists various rules and penalties (if rules are broken) for the treatment of male and female slaves. For example, punishments were prescribed for selling or mortgaging a pregnant woman slave without arranging for her maternity. There is also reference of manumission of slaves on payment of money. There were also instances of release from enslavement when a dasi bore her master a son, and the child was also considered the father’s legitimate child.



Mauryan Art and Sculpture

The magnanimous Mauryan power was also visible in monumental stone sculptures and structures. Important beginnings were made in rock-cut and stupa architecture. In the Mauryan period, stone culture dramatically emerged as the principal medium of Indian arts. The Mauryan art was strongly linked with political and religious ideology of that time. The Maurya kings, especially Ashoka, highly patronised different art forms such as stone sculptures, ring stones, disc stones, terracotta figurines, and stupa architecture. Ashoka played a major role in popularising the stupa cult. He not only redistributed the Buddha’s relics to every important town, but also ordered construction of stupas over them. It is roughly estimated that he got built approximately 84,000 stupas. Ashoka’s greatest innovation was the substitution of

stone for wood and brick. Ashokan pillars at Rampurva, Lauriya Nandangarh, and Sarnath present excellent examples of stone sculptures that developed in this period. All these pillars are circular and monolithic, and are made of sandstone found at Chunar, near Mirzapur in U.P. The Maurya period also saw the beginning of rock-cut architecture. The rock-cut architecture of Lomasha Risi cave in the Barabara hills near Gaya, and the majestic Dhauuli caves (near Bhubaneswar, Odisha which contains the rock sculpture of the front part of an elephant) is magnificent. The famous Vajrasana (throne of meditation) at the Mahabodhi temple at Bodh Gaya probably belonged to this period. Among several stone and terracotta sculptures of this period, the polished stone sculpture of a female known as the Didarganj Yakshini (demi-gods and spirits; Yakshinis are generally regarded as fertility deities, and the female counterpart of Yakshas, who were the deities connected with water, trees, forest, wilderness, and fertility) is the most famous one. Another important polished Chunar sandstone sculpture is of the torso of a nude male figure found at Lohanipur in Patna. The stone portrait of Ashoka found at Kanaganahalli (near Sannati, Karnataka) is also spectacular. Universities of Taxila, Ujjain, and Varanasi were the famous centres of learning. In the field of literature, Bhadrabahu's Kalpasutra is attributed to the Mauryan period. Lomasha Risi and Sudama caves of Gaya are other great examples of wooden architectural heritage. A large number of carved ring stones and disc stones which probably had religious and ritualistic significance have been found at various sites in northern India, such as Delhi, Patna, Taxila, Mathura, Vaishali, and Kaushambi. They have different carvings arranged in two or more concentric circles and have different designs and geometric patterns.



Sanchi Stupa



Dhuli Cave Elephant



Didarganj Yakshini



Lomash Rishi Cave



A ring well found of Mauryan times during excavation at Purana Qila in New Delhi

The Maurya period also witnessed rapid **development** of **material culture** in the Gangetic plains. The new material culture of Gangetic basin was based on the **intensive use of iron** and **iron implements** (such as socketed axes, sickles, ploughshare, and spoked wheel), prevalence of **writing**, use of **punch-marked coins**, **NBPW** pottery artifacts, introduction of **burnt bricks** and **timber** in construction (as reported by Megasthenes in his writings about the wooden structure at the Mauryan capital of Pataliputra) and **ring wells** (which supplied water to people for domestic use and also served as soak pits in congested settlements).

The existence of inscriptions, occasional NBPW potsherds and punch-marked coins in parts of Bangladesh (Bogra district), Odisha (Sisupalgarh), Andhra (Amravati), and Karnataka points towards the spread of material culture to these peripheral areas too. Our **national emblem** is adopted from the **four lion capital** of **Asokan pillar** at **Sarnath** near Benaras. Megasthenes has described the grandeur of the Mauryan palace at Pataliputra. Some remains of this palace, including the **80-pillared hall** have been found at **Kumrahar** near Patna. The high technical skill attained by the Mauryan artisans is evident in the **stone pillars' polish**, which is as **shining** as the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW).



Lion Capital at Sarnath

Mauryan art is also believed to have **Achaemenid/Persian influence** since the pillar inscriptions of Ashoka are very **similar in form and style** to the Persian king Darius's inscriptions. In fact, even the words **lipi** and **dipi** occur in the **inscriptions** of both **Ashoka** and **Darius**, and the inscriptions of both kings **begin in the third person** and then **move to the first person**. The **polished surface** and **animal capitals** of Ashokan pillars present another similarity. However, there are also **differences** between the Mauryan and Persian pillars as the **Persian pillars stand on bases**,

either shaped like a bell (i.e., inverted lotus) or a plain rectangular or circular block while in case of **Mauryan pillars the base is absent** and the inverted lotus appears at the top of the shaft. The **shape and ornamentation** of the **Mauryan lotus (typical bulge)** is also **different** from the **Persian ones (bulge is absent)**. Most of the **Persian pillars** have a **fluted surface** while **Mauryan pillars** are **smooth**. The **Maurya type abacus and independent animals carved in the round crowning are absent** in the Persian context. The Mauryans thus made a remarkable contribution to art and architecture.



DECLINE OF THE MAURYAS

The Mauryan empire **began to disintegrate** soon after the death of Ashoka around 232 BCE. Ashoka was succeeded by a chain of weak rulers since, surprisingly, after Ashoka, only one of the later Mauryas, i.e., king **Dasaratha** is known to have **issued inscriptions**. Several factors can be delineated which brought about the decline and fall of the Mauryan empire, such as:

- a. **Brahmanical reaction:** The **anti-sacrifice attitude** of Buddhism and deriding of the superfluous rituals performed by them by Ashoka must have brought **loss to the income and livelihood** options of Brahmanas who used to live on the varied gifts made to them. Also, the appointment of **Dhamma Mahamattas** would have come in **conflict** with the **Brahmanas' prestige as custodians of social morality and order**. This naturally must have made Brahmanas **hostile towards the Mauryas**. They wanted a ruler who would uphold their existing interests and privileges. It is rather interesting to note that some of the new kingdoms that arose on the ruins of the Maurya empire were ruled by Brahmanas such as the **Shungas** and the **Kanvas** in Central India and the **Satavahanas** in the Deccan. Ashoka's **pacifist policy** also resulted in **lack of preparedness** of the army, and may have been a factor responsible for the success of Greek invasion. Harprasad Shastri too corroborates

this view and holds Ashoka's pro-Buddhist and pacifist (peace) policy responsible for annoying the Brahmanas and resulting in the fall of Mauryan empire.

- b. **Oppressive rule in provinces:** There have been instances of complaints by citizens of certain provinces regarding **misrule by corrupt officials**. The appointment of Ashoka as the viceroy of Taxila during Bindusara's reign to redress the grievances of citizens against *dushtamatyas* (wicked bureaucrats) is a good example. Similarly, the Kalinga edicts also point towards the fact that **Ashoka** was very **concerned about oppression** in the provinces and therefore advises his *Mahamattas* not to torture townsmen without due cause. The disturbing and outrageous fact that the last Maurya king Brihadratha was assassinated by his commander of army during an inspection of the troops, and there was probably not much hue and cry on the murder, further substantiates the claim that the later **Mauryas** were **not** very **popular** with the public.
- c. **Financial crisis:** The **enormous expenditure** on **maintaining** such a **large army** and **bureaucracy** must have created a financial crisis for the Mauryan empire. The cost of establishing settlements on the newly cleared lands also must have strained the treasury (as the people settling on these lands initially were exempted from tax). D.D. Koshambi supports this view and feels that heavy economic pressure due to a vast army and bureaucracy may have resulted in a crisis.
- d. **Spread of material culture and new knowledge in the outlying areas:** Once the new knowledge of iron tools and weapons spread in the peripheral areas, Magadha lost its special advantage. On the basis of material culture acquired from Magadha, new kingdoms such as the **Shungas** and **Kanvas** in Central India, the **Chetis** in **Kalinga**, and the **Satavahanas** in the Deccan were founded and developed.
- e. **Neglect of the north-west frontier and absence of a boundary structure such as the Great Wall of China:** The neglect of safeguarding of the passage on the north-west frontier cost the Mauryans dearly. In the third century BCE, a

number of Central Asian nomadic tribes such as the **Scythians** were in a state of flux, and moved towards the settled empires of China and India in search of new terrains. The Chinese ruler **Shih Huang Ti** (247–210 BCE) in about 220 BCE constructed the **Great Wall of China to protect his empire** against the Scythian attack. Since such **measures** were **not taken by Ashoka** on the north-western frontier of India, in order to escape the Scythians, the Parthians, the Shakas, and the Greeks were forced to move towards India. **The Greeks** were **first to invade India** in 206 BCE and they set up their kingdom in **north Afghanistan** called **Bactria**.



Questions From Last Year's Prelims

2016

1. Who of the following had first deciphered the edicts of Emperor Ashoka?
 - (a) Georg Buhler
 - (b) James Prinsep
 - (c) Max Muller
 - (d) William Jones

2015

2. With reference to the art and archaeological history of India, which one among the following was made earliest?
 - (a) Lingaraja Temple at Bhubaneswar
 - (b) Rock-cut elephant at Dhauri
 - (c) Rock-cut monuments at Mahabalipuram
 - (d) Varaha image at Udaygiri

2002

3. The ancient Indian play Mudrarakshasa of Visakhadutta has its subject as
- (a) a conflict between Gods and demons of ancient Hindu lore
 - (b) a romantic story of an Aryan prince and a tribal woman
 - (c) the story of the power struggle between two Aryan tribes
 - (d) the court intrigues at the time of Chandragupta Maurya

1998

4. The Ashokan major edicts which tell us about the Sangam kingdom include rock edicts
- (a) I and X
 - (b) I and XI
 - (c) II and XIII
 - (d) II and XIV

1998

5. Which one of the following ancient Indian records is the earliest royal order to preserve food grains to be utilised during the crises in the country?
- (a) Saugaura Copper Plate
 - (b) Rummindei Pillar edict of Ashoka
 - (c) Prayaga Prashati
 - (d) Mehrauli Pillar inscription of Chandra

1998

6. Which one of the following edicts mentions the personal name of Ashoka?
- (a) Kalsi
 - (b) Rummindei
 - (c) Special Kalinga edict

(d) Maski

1997

7. Which one of the following scripts of ancient India was written from right to left?
- (a) Brahmi
 - (b) Nandnagiri
 - (c) Sharada
 - (d) Kharosthi

1997

8. Which one of the following statements regarding Ashokan stone pillars is incorrect?
- (a) These are highly polished.
 - (b) These are monolithic.
 - (c) The shaft of pillars is tapering in shape.
 - (d) These are parts of architectural structures.

1995

9. The name by which Ashoka is generally referred to in his inscriptions is
- (a) Chakravarti
 - (b) Dharmadeva
 - (c) Dharmakirti
 - (d) Piyadassi



Answers

- 1. (b)
- 2. (b)
- 3. (d)
- 4. (c)

5. (a)
6. (d)
7. (d)
8. (d)
9. (d)



Questions from Last Year's Mains

1. Delineate the nature and impact of India's contact with western Asia and the Mediterranean world during the Mauryan period. (History optional, 2015)
2. Discuss different interpretations of historians about the nature of Ashoka's 'dhamma'. Did his principle of dhamma-vijaya render the Mauryan empire militaristically weak? (History optional, 2014)
3. Examine the role of adhyaksha in the Mauryan administration. (History optional, 2012)
4. Assess the role of guilds and trade organisations in the development of early Indian economy. (History optional, 2010)



Practice Questions (Prelims)

1. In which one among the following Ashokan edicts is the Kalinga war mentioned?
 - (a) Pillar edict 6
 - (b) Rock edict 13
 - (c) Rock edict 11
 - (d) Pillar edict 1
2. Which of the following statements are true about Ashoka?

- (i) He was viceroy of Taxila before he became king.
 - (ii) Kalinga war fought in 261 BCE changed his outlook towards violence.
 - (iii) In his inscriptions, he is mostly referred to as Ashoka and not Piyadassi.
 - (iv) He sent his son Mahinda to China for propagating Buddhism.
- (a) i and ii
- (b) All of the above
- (c) ii, iii and iv
- (d) None of the above
3. Consider the following statements and mark the option which is correct.
- (i) Slavery did not exist during Mauryan times.
 - (ii) The Mauryas had an elaborate administrative structure.
 - (iii) Generally royal princes were appointed as viceroys.
 - (iv) Certain tests were conducted to test the suitability of the officers for different jobs.
- (a) All of the above
- (b) ii and iii
- (c) none of the above
- (d) i, ii, and iii
4. Match the following:
- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| (i) Mahamattas | (a) Village headmen |
| (ii) Adhyaksha | (B) Ministers/high officials |
| (iii) Anta-mahamattas | (C) Superintendent |
| (iv) Gramika | (D) Frontier areas in-charge |
- (a) (A)-i, (B)-ii, (C)-iii, (D)-iv
- (b) (A)-iii, (B)-i, (C)-ii, (D)-iv
- (c) (A)-iv, (B)-i, (C)-ii, (D)-iii
- (d) (A)-i, (B)-iv, (C)-iii, (D)-iii
5. Match the following:
- | | |
|------------|-----------------------------|
| (i) Dhamma | (a) District level officers |
|------------|-----------------------------|

Mahamatta

(ii) Akshapatala (B) Special cadre of dhamma-preaching officers

(iii) Rajukas (C) Audit and records office

(iv) Yuktas (D) Clerks

(a) (A)-i, (B)-ii, (C)-iii, (D)-iv

(b) (A)-iii, (B)-i, (C)-ii, (D)-iv

(c) (A)-ii, (B)-iii, (C)-iv, (D)-i

(d) (A)-i, (B)-iv, (C)-iii, (D)-iii

6. Consider the following statements and mark the option which is incorrect.

(i) Chanakya wrote Indica and Arthashastra.

(ii) The Mauryas had a great standing army and people from all varnas were recruited in the army.

(iii) Taxes were paid in cash only.

(iv) Salaries were paid in kind.

(a) All of the above

(b) ii and iii

(c) None of the above

(d) i, iii, and iv

7. Consider the following statements and mark the option which is correct.

(i) Kautilya laid down a Saptanga theory of administration.

(ii) Ashoka believed in autocratic rule and not paternal despotism.

(iii) Bindusara is also known as the conqueror of the land between two seas.

(iv) Indica is survived in fragments and tells us about the Mauryan ways and life.

(a) All of the above

(b) i, iii, and iv

(c) None of the above

(d) i, ii, and iii

8. Match the following:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| (i) Bindusara | (A) Amitraghat |
| (ii) Ashoka | (B) Devanam Piyadassi |
| (iii) Chandragupta Maurya | (C) Sandrocuttus |
| (iv) Chanakya | (D) Vishnugupta |

- (a) (A)-i, (B)-ii, (C)-iii, (D)-iv
(b) (A)-iii, (B)-i, (C)-ii, (D)-iv
(c) (A)-ii, (B)-iii, (C)-iv, (D)-i
(d) (A)-i, (B)-iv, (C)-iii, (D)-iii

9. Match the following:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| (i) Bindusara | (A) Propagated Buddhism to Ceylon |
| (ii) Ashoka | (B) Converted to Jainism |
| (iii) Chandragupta Maurya | (C) Great statesman |
| (iv) Chanakya | (D) Joined Ajivika Sect |

- (a) (A)-i, (B)-ii, (C)-iii, (D)-iv
(b) (A)-iii, (B)-i, (C)-ii, (D)-iv
(c) (A)-ii, (B)-iii, (C)-iv, (D)-i
(d) (A)-i, (B)-iv, (C)-iii, (D)-iii

10. Consider the following statements and mark the option which is correct.

- (i) Inscriptions of Ashoka were written in Pali and Prakrit only.
(ii) Girnar inscription relates to a provincial governor, Pushyamitra Sunga, of Chandragupta's reign.
(iii) Rummindei inscription mentions of Ashoka's visit to Lumbini.
(iv) Nigali Sagar Inscription mentions of enlargement of Stupa.

- (a) All of the above
(b) i, iii, and iv
(c) iii and iv
(d) i, ii, and iii

11. Consider the following statements and mark the option which is incorrect.

- (i) Dashratha was the last Maurya king who was killed by Pushyamitra Sunga.
 - (ii) Girnar inscription of Saurashtra relates to a provincial governor, Pushyagupta, of Chandragupta's reign.
 - (iii) Chandragupta had defeated Seleucus Nikator.
 - (iv) Ashoka preached about non-violence and disbanded his army.
- (a) All of the above
 - (b) ii and iii
 - (c) iii and iv
 - (d) i, ii, and iii



Answers

- 1. (b)
- 2. (a)
- 3. (a)
- 4. (c)
- 5. (b)
- 6. (d)
- 7. (b)
- 8. (a)
- 9. (c)
- 10. (c)
- 11. (b)



Practice Questions (Mains)

- 1. What were the probable reasons of decline of the Mauryan empire? Elucidate.
- 2. Describe the contribution of the Mauryas to the field of art and architecture, and the significance of Mauryan empire in the history of India.

3. Ashoka's dhamma was different than the Brahmanical dharma or Buddhist dhamma. Do you agree with this statement? Give reasons for your answers.
4. Explain the administrative structure of the Mauryan empire giving references from Kautilya's saptanga theory.

