

## The Maurya Age

### Chandragupta Maurya

The Maurya dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya, who seems to have belonged to an ordinary family. According to the brahmanical tradition, he was born of Mura, a shudra woman in the court of the Nandas. However, an earlier Buddhist tradition speaks of the Mauryas as the ruling clan of the little republic of Pipphalivana in the region of Gorakhpur near the Nepalese terai. In all likelihood, Chandragupta was a member of this clan. He took advantage of the Nandas in the last days of their rule. With the help of Chanakya, who is known as Kautilya, he overthrew the Nandas and established the rule of the Maurya dynasty. The machinations of Chanakya against Chandragupta's enemies are described in detail in the *Mudrarakshasa*, a play written by Vishakhadatta in the ninth century. In modern times, several plays have been based on it.

Justin, a Greek writer, says that Chandragupta overran the whole of India with an army of 600,000. This may or may not be true, but Chandragupta liberated north-western India from the thraldom of Seleucus, who ruled over the area west of the Indus. In the war with the Greek viceroy, Chandragupta seems to have emerged victorious. Eventually peace was concluded between the two, and in return for 500 elephants, Seleucus gave him not only his daughter but also eastern Afghanistan, Baluchistan, and the area west of the Indus. Chandragupta thus built up a vast empire which included not only Bihar and substantial parts of Orissa and Bengal but also western and north-western India, and the Deccan. Aside from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and parts of north-eastern India, the Mauryas ruled over virtually the entire subcontinent. In the north-west, they held sway over certain areas that did not even form part of the British empire. The Mauryas

also conquered the republics or *samghas* which Kautilya considered obstacles to the growth of the empire.

## Imperial Organization

The Mauryas organized a very elaborate system of administration. We know about this from the account of Megasthenes and the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. Megasthenes was a Greek ambassador sent by Seleucus to the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He lived in the Maurya capital of Pataliputra and wrote an account not only of the administration of the city of Pataliputra but also of the Maurya empire as a whole. Megasthenes's account does not survive in full, but quotations from it occur in the works of several subsequent Greek writers. These fragments have been collected and published in the form of a book entitled *Indika*, which throws valuable light on the administration, society, and economy of Maurya times.

Megasthenes's account can be supplemented by the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. Although the *Arthashastra* was finally compiled a few centuries after Maurya rule, some of its books contain material that provides authentic information about the Maurya administration and economy. These two sources enable us to draw a picture of the administrative system of Chandragupta Maurya.

Chandragupta Maurya was evidently an autocrat who concentrated all power in his hands. If we are to believe a statement in the *Arthashastra*, the king had set a high ideal. He stated that in the happiness of his subjects lay his happiness and in their troubles lay his troubles. We do not however know how far the king acted up to these ideals. According to Megasthenes, the king was assisted by a council whose members were noted for wisdom. There is nothing to show that their advice was binding on him, though the high officers were chosen from among the councillors.

The empire was divided into a number of provinces, and each of these was placed under a prince who was a scion of the royal dynasty. The provinces were divided into still smaller units, and arrangements were made for both rural and urban administration. Excavations show that a large number of towns relate to Maurya times. Pataliputra, Kaushambi, Ujjain, and Taxila were the most important cities. Megasthenes states that numerous cities existed in India, but he considered Pataliputra to be the most important. He calls it Palibothra. This Greek term means a city with gates. According to him, Pataliputra was bounded by a deep ditch and a wooden wall crowned with 570 towers, and had 64 gates.

The ditch, timber palisades, and also wooden houses have been found in excavations. According to Megasthenes, Pataliputra was 9.33 miles long and 1.75 miles broad. This size tallies with that of Patna even today, because Patna is all length with little breadth. Given this conformity, it is possible to trust Megasthenes's other statements.

The Greek ambassador also refers to the administration of Pataliputra, the capital of the Mauryas. The city was administered by six committees, each of which consisted of five members. These committees were entrusted with sanitation, care of foreigners, registration of birth and death, regulation of weights and measures, and similar other functions. Various types of weights belonging to Maurya times have been found in several places in Bihar.

According to Kautilya, the central government maintained about two dozen departments of state, which controlled social and economic activities at least in the areas that were in proximity to the capital. The most striking feature of Chandragupta's administration was its maintenance of a huge army. A Roman writer called Pliny states that Chandragupta maintained 600,000 foot soldiers, 30,000 cavalymen, and 9000 elephants. Another source tells us that the Mauryas maintained 8000 chariots. In addition to these, it appears that the Mauryas also maintained a navy. The administration of the armed forces, according to Megasthenes, was carried on by a board of thirty officers divided into six committees, each committee consisting of five members. It seems that each of the six wings of the armed forces, the army, the cavalry, the elephants, the chariots, the navy, and the transport, was assigned to the care of a separate committee. The Mauryas' military strength was almost three times that of the Nandas, and this was apparently because of a much larger empire and thus far greater resources.

How did Chandragupta Maurya manage to meet the expenses of such a huge army? If we rely on the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, it would appear that the state controlled almost all the economic activities in the realm. The state brought new land under cultivation with the aid of cultivators and shudra labourers. The virgin land that was opened to cultivation yielded handsome income to the state in the form of revenue collected from the newly settled peasants. It appears that taxes collected from the peasants varied from one-fourth to one-sixth of the produce. Those who were provided with irrigation facilities by the state had to pay for it. In addition, in times of emergency, peasants were compelled to raise more crops. Tolls were also levied on commodities brought to town for sale, and they were collected at the gate. Moreover, the state enjoyed a monopoly in mining, sale of liquor, manufacture of arms, etc. This naturally brought vast

resources to the royal exchequer. Chandragupta thus established a well-organized administrative system and gave it a sound financial base.

## Ashoka (273–32 BC)

Chandragupta Maurya was succeeded by Bindusara, whose reign is important for its continuing links with the Greek princes. His son, Ashoka, is the greatest of the Maurya rulers. According to Buddhist tradition, he was so cruel in his early life that he killed his ninety-nine brothers to win the throne. However, as this statement is based on a legend, it may be mythical. Ashoka's biography, written by Buddhist authors, is so full of fiction that it cannot be taken seriously.

## Ashokan Inscriptions

The history of Ashoka is reconstructed on the basis of his inscriptions, thirty-nine, in number, that are classified into Major Rock Edicts, Minor Rock Edicts, Separate Rock Edicts, Major Pillar Edicts, and Minor Pillar Edicts. The name Ashoka occurs in copies of Minor Rock Edict I found at three places in Karnataka and at one in MP. Thus, altogether, the name Ashoka occurs four times. It is significant that Ashoka's name does not occur in any of his inscriptions from north or north-west India. The inscriptions which do not carry his name mention only *devanampiya piyadasi*, dear to the gods, and leave out the name Ashoka. The title *devanampiya* or 'dear to gods' adopted by Ashoka was not unique but also adopted by his ancestors. However, *piyadasi* or 'good looking' seems to have been his unique title. Ashokan inscriptions have been found in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Altogether, they appear at forty-seven places, and the total number of versions is 182 including two edicts which are considered spurious. It is significant that Ashokan inscriptions which were generally located on ancient highways, have been found at six places in Afghanistan. Composed in Prakrit, they were written in Brahmi script in the greater part of the subcontinent. However, in the north-western part of the subcontinent they appeared in Aramaic language and Kharoshthi script, and in Afghanistan they were written in both Aramaic and Greek scripts and languages. He was the first Indian king to speak directly to the people through his inscriptions which carry royal orders. The inscriptions throw light on Ashoka's career, his external and domestic policies, and the extent of his empire.

## Impact of the Kalinga War

The ideology of Buddhism guided Ashoka's state policy at home and abroad. After his accession to the throne, Ashoka fought only one major war called the Kalinga war. According to him, 100,000 people were killed in the course of it, several lakhs died, and 150,000 were taken prisoners. These numbers are exaggerated, because the number 'a hundred thousand' is used as a cliché in Ashokan inscriptions. At any rate, it appears that the king was deeply moved by the massacre in this war. The war caused great suffering to the brahmana priests and Buddhist monks, and this in turn brought upon Ashoka much grief and remorse. He therefore abandoned the policy of physical occupation in favour of one of cultural conquest. In other words, *bherighosha* was replaced with *dhammaghosha*. We quote below the words of Ashoka from his Thirteenth Major Rock Edict:

When he had been consecrated eight years the Beloved of the Gods, the King Piyadasi, conquered Kalinga. A hundred and fifty thousand people were deported, a hundred thousand were killed and many times that number perished. Afterwards, now that Kalinga was annexed, the Beloved of the Gods very earnestly practised *dhamma*, desired *dhamma*, and taught *dhamma*. On conquering Kalinga the Beloved of the Gods felt remorse, for when an independent country is conquered the slaughter, death and deportation of the people is extremely grievous to the Beloved of the Gods and weighs heavily on his mind. What is even more deplorable to the Beloved of the Gods, is that those who dwell there, whether brahmanas, *shramanas*, or those of other sects, or householders who show obedience to their teachers and behave well and devotedly towards their friends, acquaintances, colleagues, relatives, slaves, and servants, all suffer violence, murder and separation from their loved ones ... Today if a hundredth or a thousandth part of those people who were killed or died or were deported when Kalinga was annexed were to suffer similarly, it would weigh heavily on the mind of the Beloved of the Gods ... The Beloved of the Gods considers victory by *dhamma* to be the foremost victory ...

Ashoka now appealed ideologically to the tribal people and the frontier kingdoms. The subjects of the independent states in Kalinga were asked to obey the king as their father and to repose confidence in him. The officials appointed by Ashoka were instructed to propagate this idea among all sections of his subjects. The tribal peoples were similarly asked to follow the principles of *dhamma* (dharma). He no longer treated foreign dominions as legitimate areas for military conquest. He took steps for the welfare of men and animals in foreign lands, which was a new thing considering the conditions in those times. He sent ambassadors of peace to the Greek sections of his subjects. The tribal peoples were similarly asked to follow the principles of *dhamma* (dharma). He no longer treated foreign dominions as legitimate areas for military conquest. He took steps for the welfare of men and animals in foreign lands, which was a new thing considering the conditions in those times. He sent ambassadors of peace to the Greek kingdoms in West Asia and Greece. All this is based on Ashoka's

inscriptions. If we rely on the Buddhist tradition, it would appear that he sent missionaries for the propagation of Buddhism to Sri Lanka and Central Asia, and there is inscriptional evidence to support Ashoka's initiatives to propagate Buddhism in Sri Lanka. As an enlightened ruler, Ashoka tried to enlarge his sphere of influence through propaganda.

It would be wrong to think that the Kalinga war caused Ashoka to become an extreme pacifist. He did not pursue the policy of peace for the sake of peace under all circumstances, but adopted the practical policy of consolidating his empire. He retained Kalinga after its conquest and incorporated it into his empire. There is also nothing to show that he disbanded the huge army maintained from the time of Chandragupta Maurya. Although he repeatedly asked the tribal people to follow the policy of dharma, he threatened adverse consequences if they violated the established rules of social order and righteousness (dharma). Within the empire he appointed a class of officers known as the *rajukas*, who were vested with the authority not only to reward people but also to punish them when necessary. Ashoka's policy to consolidate the empire in this way bore fruit. The Kandahar inscription speaks of the success of his policy with the hunters and fishermen, who gave up killing animals and possibly took to a settled agricultural life.

## Internal Policy and Buddhism

Ashoka was converted to Buddhism as a result of the Kalinga war. According to tradition, he became a monk, made huge gifts to the Buddhists, and undertook pilgrimages to the Buddhist shrines. His visits to Buddhist shrines is also suggested by the dhamma *yatras* mentioned in his inscriptions.

According to tradition, Ashoka held the third Buddhist council (*sangiti*) and missionaries were sent not only to south India but also to Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), and other countries to convert the people there. Brahmi inscriptions of the second and first centuries BC have been found in Sri Lanka.

Ashoka set a very high ideal for himself, and this was the ideal of paternal kingship. He repeatedly asked his officials to tell his subjects that the king looked upon them as his children. As agents of the king, the officials were also asked to take care of the people. Ashoka appointed *dhammamahamatras* to propagate dharma among various social groups, including women, and appointed *rajukas* for the administration of justice in his empire.

Ashoka disapproved of rituals, especially those observed by women. He

forbade killing certain birds and animals, prohibited the slaughter of animals in the royal kitchen, and forbade the slaughter of animals in sacrifices. He banned gay social functions in which people indulged in an excess of revelry.

Ashoka's dharma was not however a narrow dharma and cannot be regarded as a sectarian faith. His Kandahar Greek inscription preaches amity between the sects. Ashoka's inscriptions are called *dhammalipi*, which cover not only religion and morality but also embrace social and administrative matters. They can be compared to the Dharmashastras or law-books written in Sanskrit under brahmanical influence. Though the *dhammalipis* were written in Prakrit under Buddhist influence, they try to regulate the social order like the Dharmashastras. The Ashokan edicts can be also compared to the *shasanas* or royal edicts issued in Sanskrit by the brahmanized kings. The broad objective was to preserve the social order. He ordained that people should obey their parents, pay respect to the brahmanas and Buddhist monks, and show mercy to slaves and servants. Above all, the *dhammalipi* asks the people to show firm devotion (*dridha bhakti*) or loyalty to king. These instructions are found in both the Buddhist and brahmanical faiths.

Ashoka taught people to live and let live. He emphasized compassion towards animals and proper behaviour towards relatives. His teachings were meant to strengthen the institution of family and the existing social classes. He held that if the people behaved well they would go to heaven, but never said that they would attain nirvana, which was the goal of Buddhist teachings. Ashoka's teachings were thus intended to maintain the existing social order on the basis of tolerance. He does not seem to have preached any sectarian faith.

## Ashoka's Place in History

It is said that Ashoka's pacific policy destroyed the Maurya empire, but this is not true. On the contrary, Ashoka has a number of achievements to his credit. He was certainly a great missionary ruler in the history of the ancient world. He enthusiastically worked with great devotion for his mission and achieved a great deal at home and abroad.

Ashoka brought about the political unification of the country. He bound it further by one dharma, one language, and virtually one script called Brahmi which was used in most of his inscriptions. In unifying the country he respected such non-Indian scripts as Kharoshthi, Aramaic, and Greek. His inscriptions appear not only in different types of the Indian languages like Prakrit, but also in



Greek and particularly in Aramaic which was a Semitic language of ancient Syria. His multi-script and multi-lingual inscriptions enabled him to contact literate people. Ashoka followed a tolerant religious policy, not attempting to foist his Buddhist faith on his subjects; on the contrary, he made gifts to non-Buddhist and even anti-Buddhist sects.

Ashoka was fired with a zeal for missionary activity. He deputed officials in the far-flung parts of the empire. He helped administration and promoted cultural interaction between the developed Gangetic basin and distant backward provinces. The material culture, characteristic of the heart of the empire, spread to Kalinga, the lower Deccan, and northern Bengal.

Above all, Ashoka is important in history for his policy of peace, nonaggression, and cultural conquest. He had no model in early Indian history for the pursuit of such a policy; nor was there any comparable example elsewhere except in Egypt where Akhnaton had pursued a pacific policy in the fourteenth century BC. But Ashoka was not aware of his Egyptian predecessor. Although Kautilya advised the king to be always intent on physical conquest, Ashoka followed quite the reverse policy. He asked his successors to give up the policy of conquest and aggression, followed by the Magadhan princes till the Kalinga war, and counselled them to adopt a policy of peace sorely needed after a period of aggressive wars lasting for two centuries. He consistently adhered to his policy, for though he possessed sufficient resources and maintained a huge army, he did not wage any war after the conquest of Kalinga. In this sense, Ashoka was certainly far ahead of his day and generation.

However, Ashoka's policy did not have any lasting impact on his viceroys and vassals, who declared themselves independent in their respective areas after the king retired in 232 BC. Similarly, the policy did not succeed in converting his neighbours, who swooped on the north-western frontier of his empire within thirty years of Ashoka's giving up power in 232 BC.

## Chronology

(BC)

14 C

The Egyptian king Akhnaton pursued a pacific policy.

273–32

Ashoka's reign.

232

Ashoka gives up power.

2–1 C

Brahmi inscriptions found in Sri Lanka.